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Much Assembly Required: Cartoons, Comics, and the Transmedia Quarantining of Queer Women of Color

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Much Assembly Required: Cartoons, Comics, and the Transmedia Quarantining of Queer Women of Color

by

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Dedication

To my mother, Koren. Everything good in me, I owe to you.

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Abstract

Much Assembly Required: Cartoons, Comics, and the Transmedia Quarantining of Queer Women of Color

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This project analyses the use of transmedia storytelling by two cartoons, *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time*. These two cartoons use transmedia comic book expansions to separate the queer aspects of certain characters' identities away from the television show and into the transmedia supplements. In examining this separation of queerness between mediums, I argue for the emergence of *transmedia quarantining,* where queer women of color in these shows have their queerness removed from the television screen for exposition in a secondary medium. First, this project situates these two shows within the post-network era and recognizes multicasting as a method by which the shows' parent networks navigated the challenges posed by era-specific changes in television. In multicasting, adults are incorporated into the audiences of these cartoons through the hyperdiegetic appeal of transmedia storytelling. Within multicasting, however, there is an implicit prioritization of one audience over the other. Children take precedence over adults in this dynamic, and queer women of color are subsumed by the monolithic adult audience. These shows use comic books to develop the queer aspect of these characters' identities. Taking into account the low thresholds for success in comics,

particularly those based on preexisting properties, I propose that these shows are able to reap the advantages of multicasting to loyal comic readers without engendering financial risk. However, the prioritizing dynamics of multicasting are recreated in comics. The medium's associations with white, heterosexual men remarginalizes queer women of color as devalued audiences, despite the fact that they are pushed to comics in search of representation. The final component of this thesis is a textual analysis of the shows in question; by conducting an analysis of the narrative construction of these characters as queer women of color, I demonstrate that their identities are already obscured prior to moments of transmedia quarantine. By separating the queer component of these characters into a different medium, these cartoons are able to claim representational diversity. In doing so, the queer women of color seeking out this representation are disproportionately affected by these storytelling strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

TOONING IN

On July 5th, 2018, Cartoon Network's critically acclaimed *Steven Universe* (2013-present) aired its 21st episode ever, "Made of Honor," which featured a wedding between Ruby and Sapphire, two members of the show's main ensemble of characters (Henderson 2018). This episode represents the first same-sex marriage between women featured on a broadcast program made for children (Henderson 2018). Roughly two months later, Cartoon Network aired the final episode of one of its longest running series, *Adventure Time* (2010-2018), on September 3, 2018. Although less groundbreaking than the marriage between Ruby and Sapphire, this final episode showed a kiss between Princess Bubblegum and Marceline, two of the show's main female characters. At the beginning of the series, Bubblegum and Marceline's relationship was adversarial and shallow, but over the course of eight years, several hundred episodes, and dozens of comic book issues, *Adventure Time* developed a complicated history for these two characters. Contrary to *Steven Universe*, Marceline and Bubblegum's romantic relationship was slowly unearthed across these different mediums throughout the life of the franchise, where developmental work that occurred off-screen culminated in cartoon romance in the show's finale.

Adventure Time's utilization of multiple mediums to develop Marceline and Bubblegum's relationship alongside television episodes of the show can be thought of as a form of *transmedia storytelling.* In his book *Convergence Culture* (2006), Henry Jenkins defines a transmedia story as one that "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (Jenkins 2006, 95-

96). Jenkins introduced this idea as a means of understanding franchises like *The Matrix* that expand outward from one medium (typically film or television) and move into others, like comic books or video games, and how this expansion offers consumers multiple points of entry into a franchise *and* the potential for additional creative input and expansion. These multiple points of entry, as imagined by Jenkins, should not require complete knowledge of every facet of a franchise, and allow for the strengths of each medium to be more fully realized in these expanded texts (Jenkins 2006, 96-97).

This idea of a transmedia franchise, although popularized by Jenkins in *Convergence Culture,* has been employed by media industries for decades. Marsha Kinder's work on children's transmedia franchises introduces many of the theories that inform Jenkins' transmedia storytelling, but Kinder specifically approaches these multimedia franchises as systems that teach children how to participate with the intertextual nature of entertainment media (Kinder 1991, 4-5). Working with animated shows like *The Muppets* (1984-1991) and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1987-1990) Kinder's conceptualization of what she calls the "supersystem" captures the way that transmedia franchises expand characters and narratives across mediums in order to court juvenile audiences as consumers across a variety of different media, including video games, television, films, and merchandise (Kinder 1991, 85). Whether engaging with Kinder's angle of consumer loyalty or Jenkins' creative extrapolation, a core aspect of transmedia storytelling that is consistent between these two early and influential conceptualizations is the idea that the addition of a new medium into a franchise is a strategy of *expansion*, whether this be an expansion of the text in terms of its narrative capabilities or its robustness as a system of capitalistic participation (Jenkins 2006, 96).

There is a constant return to this idea of expansion in scholarship on transmedia television, regardless of whether these expansions into different media are driven by rapid

changes in the structure of media industries or by the desire to create an innovative story. Elizabeth Evans, in her book *Transmedia Television* (2011), expands upon Jenkins' consideration of audience entry points in transmedia stories through an exploration of platforms, narrative diversity, and the new distribution methods of post-network television (Evans 2011, 13). Here, Evans is incorporating Amanda Lotz's conceptualization of the "post-network era" of television into her analysis of transmedia television; as viewing technologies and platforms expand, she argues that transmedia television narratives have adapted to accommodate the increasing number of ways audiences can and will access the growing narrative depths of television (Lotz 2007; Evans 2011, 40-41). Working with the same post-network theory as Evans, M. J. Clarke provides a conceptualization of transmedia storytelling that reconciles Jenkins' focus on narrative and artistic proliferation with Kinder's emphasis on consumer loyalty through an understanding of transmedia television as an aesthetic and economic strategy (Clarke 2013, 5). As television becomes more niche in an effort to survive changing viewing habits among audiences, the television industry exploits audiences' loyalty to the text and desire for more content by expanding into different mediums. Although Clarke characterizes this move as exploitative on the part of the industry, it is undeniably reminiscent of Jenkins' early emphasis on the funneling of broader television audiences into more niche mediums (like games or comic books) for "extra" content (Clarke 2013, 4, 20-21; Jenkins 2006, 96).

It is against this background of transmedia television scholarship that I wish to think about transmedia practices as *exclusionary* rather than *expansive*. In *Adventure Time,* the exploration of Bubblegum and Marceline's romantic relationship was subtextually referenced in *Marceline and the Scream Queens* (2012), a series of comics that ran concurrent with the show - but these key moments of character development did not have bearing on their on-screen lives until the series finale in 2018. A similar phenomenon can

be seen in *Avatar: The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014), the sequel series to Nickelodeon's award-winning *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-2008). *The Legend of Korra* followed the same format as The WB's cult classic *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (1996-2003)[1], where a comic book series of the same name was developed as a continuation of the show after its life on television came to an end (Clarke 2013, 31). *Turf Wars* (2017), *The Legend of Korra's* comic successor, picks up in the exact moment where the show ends, albeit three years after it was taken off the air. The show's two main female characters, Korra and Asami, share a kiss in the first few pages of the comic that retroactively establishes queer subtext in the series' finale. These two shows, with their transmedially canonized queer women, hint at a paradigm of *transmedia quarantining* in children's cartoons, wherein the expansion of the television show into another format – in these cases, comic books – manifests as the *exclusion* of queerness from the television screen.

This concept of quarantining refers to the way that my two case studies have utilized transmedia storytelling as a means of expanding on the narrative of the show, as is consistent with understandings of transmedia storytelling outlined by Clarke, Evans, and Jenkins. I am, however, particularly invested in how these forays into different mediums have also resulted in a separation of the queer aspect of the characters' identities away from the television screen. My emphasis on identity in this configuration is somewhat at odds with the aforementioned definitions of transmedia storytelling. As explained by Evans, television's use of transmedia storytelling expands audience's access to what Matt Hills refers to as the "hyperdiegesis," or the massive narrative world within which the narrow scope of a television show is situated (Evans 2011, 29). Evans pinpoints worldbuilding as one of the defining features of transmedia storytelling, noting, "it is not individual

[1] The network was known as The WB throughout *Buffy's* lifespan, but is now known as the CW

characters or events that become important, but the creation of a universe that is 'complex' and 'vast'" (Evans 2011, 28).

Where I diverge significantly from Evans and Jenkins is in their conceptualization of narrative, as my analysis of *Adventure Time* and *The Legend of Korra* will position identity – and how it is communicated through the pairing of characters into queer female relationships, exposition, and world-building – as an important aspect of narrative, particularly where Evans (building, again, on Jenkins) emphasizes the importance of "narrative cohesion" when stories are developed transmedially (Evans 2011, 29). In foregrounding specifically queered, raced, and gendered identities as an aspect of narrative, I seek to highlight how the removal of key moments of canonization out of one medium and into another destabilizes the cohesiveness of these character identities, akin to how the removal of a key plot point off of television and into a supplementary medium would destabilize the progression of a story arc.

My emphasis on the issue of queer quarantine in these shows stems from scholarship that has explored trends in media where queer people, particularly queer women of color, have been either erased from television or relegated to existences made of pure subtext. I use "queer" to refer to sexual identities outside of heterosexuality and different gender expressions. While all of the characters that I study use she/her/hers pronouns, the LGBT acronym cannot capture the full breadth of gender expression at work. Additionally, my use of the word queer reflects the In their study on Twitter campaigns from viewers demanding better treatment of queer characters on television, Navar-Gill and Stanfill document the awareness and anger that audiences have voiced regarding television's habit of killing queer female characters and "teasing" audiences with queer representation (Navar-Gill and Stanfill 2018). This possibility of queerness is explored in deeper detail by Eve Ng, who examines the ways that television attempts to court queer

audiences without actualizing the queer subtext or by providing unsatisfactory fulfillment, often in the form of killing one or more of the queer characters (Ng 2017, Waggoner 2018). Cases of queer baiting and on-screen killing of queer women of color have been studied exhaustively by scholars and popular trade journalists alike as the paradigm has proliferated[2]. While I draw upon the history of the difficulties queer women of color have faced in terms of on-screen representation, I engage specifically with these case studies and their use of medium, rather than subtext, to soft-pedal the queerness of their characters. Where Ng often sees queerbaiting as the constant refusal to canonize queer women outright, I propose transmedia quarantining as a way of understanding how medium shifts and passing time in *Adventure Time* and *The Legend of Korra* challenge my above reading of Korra/Asami and Marceline/Bubblegum as queer. While also exploring how transmedia storytelling has the potential to work as an exclusionary device, I aim to understand the industrial and narrative conditions under which queer women of color are allowed to exist on television.

Though there have been several noteworthy complications to the idea of transmedia storytelling since Jenkins' and Kinder's foundational conceptualizations, I will engage more specifically with transmedia literature on television and more general work on comic books in order to understand the industrial synergy between the two. Although my focus here is on television that spurs comic book extensions, there is a growing body of work dedicated to understanding the complex relationships between comics, movies, and transmedia systems[3]. Flanagan et al.'s book *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe* explores the different facets of the Marvel Cinematic Universe

[2] See also: Rose, "How Do We Solve A Problem Like 'Queerbaiting'? On TV's Not-So-Subtle Gay Subtext", Autostraddle.com, 2013

[3] See also: Gordon et al. *Film and Comic Books*, University Press of Mississippi, 2007.

(MCU) and how they interface with one another artistically while also examining the more industrial logistics of creating such a far-reaching and interwoven universe (Flanagan et al. 2016). One chapter of their book delves specifically into the MCU's tie-in content, and they emphasize an order of operations within transmedia systems that is not addressed in Jenkins' original conception of transmedia storytelling. Talking specifically about tie-in comics, Flanagan et al. state that, "this addition to the transmedia storytelling arsenal makes a contribution, but the constraints that the hierarchal relationship produces on the comics' ability to participate with a level of parity in terms of other MCU texts cannot be dismissed" (192). Even though comics represent the original source of the MCU's characters and stories, the films eventually supersede the comics as the focal point of the MCU transmedia system, and there is an undeniable power differential between tie-in comics for Marvel movies and satellite shows like ABC's *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-present).

It is because of the parallels in function and disparity between the MCU tie-in comics and my two case studies that I locate this project in more recent scholarship. As studied by Kinder and Hendershot, American cartoon characters that utilized comic books from the 80s did so with almost the sole purpose of selling toys and strengthening the robustness of the supersystem (Hendershot 1998, 98-101). *Adventure Time* and *The Legend of Korra*, however, are utilizing their comics to add depth to the narrative worlds established by the more dominant television counterparts. As Flanagan et al.'s examples of the *Thor: The Dark World* (2013) tie-in comic demonstrates, the comics provide space for exposition that cannot (or will not) be included on-screen for the consumers who care enough to seek out this extra information in a format that is especially well-suited for this kind of work. It is the nature of the content – that is, confirmation of queer identity and queer romance - that is being shunted into this supporting medium that I problematize in this project.

My attention to the issue of transmedia erasure of queerness in children's cartoons relocates the conversation of queer identity erasure into a genre where the suppression of queerness is expected. Heather Hendershot's book *Saturday Morning Censors* engages with the politics, histories, and cultural ramifications of children's television regulations from roughly the 1970s to the 1990s. Although the case studies in this project have not yet been subject to the same kinds of commercial regulations as the shows Hendershot studies, she makes the vital point that many animators and children's content producers have internalized the standards associated with censorship from the 70s and 80s; although the queerness of characters in children's cartoons is (obviously) no longer forbidden, there is still a persistent after-image of the censorship-like standards that animators and networks taught themselves to adhere to in the 1980s-1990s (Hendershot 1998, 55-56). With this history of internalization in mind, we can begin to theorize different sources of industrial anxiety over having clearly recognizable queer representation in children's cartoons that do not immediately position networks as antagonists in the paradigm of transmedia quarantine. To return to my opening anecdotes, *Steven Universe* creator Rebecca Sugar characterizes the momentous same-sex wedding as a result of several long, hard years of negotiating with an industry that was not willing (or ready) to have such open displays of queer love on a children's network *until* the year of the episode's airing. Sugar divulges that the episode "Made of Honor" would not have been possible in 2013 when she initially presented the idea to Cartoon Network, and that there was a point where she was anticipating that her insistence on displaying queer identities would cost her the show (Romano 2018).

For *Adventure Time* and *The Legend of Korra*, which both ran during this "impossible" period that Sugar describes, the use of other mediums to tell these queer stories becomes a strategy for circumventing the lingering presence of cartoon regulation

(Hendershot 1998, 14). Undoubtedly, the potential of queer visibility in these cartoons has been partially facilitated by the Supreme Court's legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States in 2016. Although the legalization was, by no means, a wide cultural endorsement of queer people, the fact that same-sex marriage is now legally protected across the nation gives queer characters a validation that they did not previously have. This shift in the legal narrative surrounding same-sex marriage in 2016 marks a distinct temporal landmark in the timeline of my case studies, the crystallization of post-network era strategies, and the proliferation of comic book adaptions and franchises.

My study of *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time's* use of transmedia comic books relies on the mixing of several methods. My methodological approach to transmedia quarantining begins with an industrial analysis that slowly builds to a cultural one; discourse analysis is consistent throughout, while the second chapter offers a concentrated economic analysis of the comic extensions of my two case studies. The first two chapters of this project deal primarily with industry. The first chapter looks at television during the turmoil of the post-network era by incorporating older work on Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network from scholars like Sarah Banet-Weiser, Heather Hendershot, and Carol Stabile et al. (Banet-Weiser 2007; Hendershot 2004; Stabile et al. 2003). I connect this scholarship, which engages with production, marketing, and distribution in different measures, to updated theories of television distribution and contemporary[4] trade coverage of the two shows. Although a smaller component of the first chapter, trade discourse informs the economic struggles of Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network during the post-network era. The second chapter opens with a similar historical foundation for the comics industry, relying on work from authors like Shawn Kidman, Matthew Pustz, and Matt Yockey, who have all

[4] By contemporary, I mean contemporary to my two case studies, i.e. 2010-2016

studied comics as a medium predisposed to transmedia storytelling (Kidman 2019; Pustz 1999; Yockey 2015). I introduce the idea of economic risk in this chapter, which is informed by my analysis of market shares and sales from Dark Horse and BOOM! Studios and more discourse analysis of trade publications concerning transmedia comics. Talking about comics in an industrial capacity inevitably leads to analysis of the culture around comics, as so much of the contemporary comics industry is informed by shifting cultural attitudes towards comics and those who read them (Kidman 2019, 12-13).

The third and final chapter of this project consists of textual analysis of my two case studies that builds off of the cultural analysis of the second chapter. Queer women of color are already severely underrepresented on television; understanding why transmedia quarantining is especially damaging for them requires looking at how these identities are constructed in their shows prior to transmedia intervention. My textual analysis incorporates several multidisciplinary approaches, including theories from children's literature, television studies, and traditional gender theory (Thomas 2019; Warner 2017; Butler 1988). Because these identities are constructed across mediums, it is crucial that I offer industrial contexts for each medium in addition to a close textual reading of the characters in their "original" state. By blending these methods together, I intend to stay true to Clarke's characterization of transmedia storytelling as both an industrial and an aesthetic strategy (Clarke 2013, 5). Transmedia storytelling does not originate from either culture or industry, and I must acknowledge this dual nature before I offer any criticisms of it.

The first chapter of this project engages with the ways that children's television has incorporated adult audiences as viewers through an adaptation of Julia Himberg's concept of "multicasting" (Himberg 2017). Multicasting, in its simplest form, targets niche segments of a broader audience with programming that is tailored towards the niche

audience's identity (Himberg 2017, 14). Multicasting allows these channels to attract smaller subsets of the audience without alienating their existing viewership, and transmedia storytelling is one of the ways these niche, adult audiences are courted. This chapter first provides an account of the changes brought on by the post-network era more broadly and at Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network specifically. By appealing to niche, adult audiences, these cartoons were able to weather the storm of post-network era declines in viewers. The use of narrative complexity and transmedia storytelling appeals directly to the consumption habits of adult audiences (Mittell 2015). When working together, however, multicasting and transmedia storytelling prioritize certain audiences over others; despite the fact that queer women of color are being represented in these shows, they are only a small subset of the adults that Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network want to incorporate to supplement their primarily young viewership. They are subsumed by the monolithic "adult" audience, rather than being catered to as a specific identity group. This chapter will lay the contextual groundwork for understanding how representation is complicated by storytelling practices. Transmedia quarantining, while perhaps an unintended result of these industrial strategies, is still damaging to queer women of color seeking representation, especially when they are pushed into other mediums.

The second chapter focuses on the particularity of comics in the transmedia equation involving these two shows, paying specific attention to the way that multicasting is recreated in this separate medium. By concentrating on two comic book expansions of each show, *Marceline and the Scream Queens* and *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars*, I consider *why* comics are the medium where exposition of identity occurs for these two shows and interrogate the multiple levels of contradiction that are at play in this answer. Drawing again from Clarke, the aesthetic and economic strategies inherent in his understanding of transmedia television allows us to think through Jenkins' optimistic

understanding of the storytelling strategy as relying upon the strengths of the specific mediums in terms of industrial and cultural advantages (Clarke 2013). For *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time*, comic books most closely resemble the aesthetics and narrative capacities of the original shows, and the low thresholds for success in comics make them an economically safe venture for the development of potentially contentious stories. Because of the designation of these comics as for "all ages," I argue that *Marceline and the Scream Queens* and *Turf Wars* re-marginalize queer women of color while directly appealing to their interests. This chapter will interrogate the history of independent comics as a place for minority stories while also asserting that the "all-ages" categorization of these comics flattens this diverse potential. Finally, relying on Shawna Kidman's work on the symbiotic relationship between comics and film in *Comic Books Incorporated* (2019) and Matthew Pustz's articulations of comic book culture, I tease out how these histories involving queer stories of color and the interdependence between film and comics makes the telling of these queer stories in comics a safe strategy culturally and economically.

The final chapter of this project will be comprised of a textual analysis of my two case studies, with particular attention to the ways that the identities of these characters are communicated on-screen. My reading of these characters in the shows will demonstrate that the identities of these queer women of color are *already* obfuscated by narrative complexity prior to moments of transmedia quarantining. I take pains throughout this project to maintain that transmedia quarantining is a consequence of these storytelling strategies, rather than an intended outcome. My analysis of the heavily codified identities of these characters demonstrates that the quarantining of queerness among women of color represents the problematic potential of transmedia storytelling. Throughout this chapter, I combine Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' idea of the "imagination gap" within children's media with Kristen Warner's concept of "plastic representation" to interrogate issues of

accessibility and authenticity regarding these characters' identities (Thomas 2019; Warner 2017). By blending these concepts, I seek to address the question of whether or not these characters can be considered representative of queer female relationships when their identities have been complicated to this extent.

For a marginalized group that is already subject to extremely low levels of representation in television, this identity separation disproportionately targets people that are already at risk, and transmedia storytelling complicates these preexisting barriers to representation. *The Legend of Korra's* Asami and Korra are both easily understood as women of color through the logic of the show's universe, which is established through the prequel series and through visual cues in the design of the world and the characters. The canonization of their relationship through comic books, however, came nearly five years after the conclusion of their show on-air, and while the confirmation of their romantic involvement is swift in the graphic novels, I wish to interrogate issues of how the queer aspect of their identities is dislocated in both time and in medium. In the case of *Adventure Time*, Marceline and Bubblegum are non-human or human adjacent, and understanding them as women/of color requires an understanding of both the fictional world of their show and of gender as a performative act (Butler 1988).

To conclude, this project will speak to larger questions about *how* queer women of color are visible on television while emphasizing the specific reliance on comics in order to execute transmedia quarantines. Returning again to the example of *Steven Universe's* same-sex wedding, it is possible that the representational capabilities of cartoons are changing alongside cultural attitudes towards queer people. These two case studies show transmedia storytelling's problematic potential for queer people to be split across mediums. There are larger questions concerning the potential of these media that cannot fit into this project. Multicasting notwithstanding, *The Legend of Korra*, *Adventure Time,* and *Steven*

Universe do push the boundaries of what is considered suitable, or possible, for a kid's show. I will spend time in my conclusion ruminating on the potential of cartoons as a space for articulating the complex intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, particularly when live-action television often still seems to struggle with these narratives. Imbricated in the quarantining capacity of transmedia storytelling, however, is the stigmatization of queer, adult women of color looking for representation – and romantic development – in a medium that is, first and foremost, for children. In thinking through these layers, I hope to inspire more work on both the audiences of cartoons and the assumed benefits of transmedia storytelling.

Chapter 1

Kids and Grown-Ups Love It So:

Multicasting A Wide Net

The first chapter of this project explores how multicasting and transmedia storytelling are adopted as strategies by Nickelodeon's *The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014) and Cartoon Network's *Adventure Time* (2010-2018) during the post-network era. The "post-network era," as defined by Amanda Lotz, refers to television from the mid-2000s[5] onward that is characterized by new industrial strategies, changing economic models, and more viewer autonomy (Lotz 2007, 8). As the linear nature of television was destabilized by convergences across culture, media, and industry, viewers had more choice in how, when, and where they watched television. Henry Jenkins defines *convergence* as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences" (2006, 2). Recording devices like DVRs, streaming services such as Netflix, and YouTube's provision of video content via the internet gave audiences the means to personalize their viewing experiences across multiple television viewing platforms, which resulted in a fragmentation of audiences (Lotz 2007, 15-16; 58-60; 80).

Convergence culture's facilitation of content flow between different screens was especially troublesome for Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network. Because of the emergence of the internet as a significant means of accessing content, more and more screens were competing with the television for audiences' attention – particularly websites like YouTube, which Lotz cites in her introduction (Lotz 2007, 2). Although Nickelodeon and

[5] Lotz is careful to point out that the post-network era has no definitive starting point, but she uses the midpoint of the 2000s as a way of grounding her book.

Cartoon Network earned success by offering content that was geared towards a specific audience of kids, this success was predicated on the fact that kids would watch according to the channels' schedules. While other cable channels and networks were experiencing drops in ratings as a result of this proliferation of content and diversifying audience tastes, Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon were confronted with a new technological landscape that allowed kids to consume content *without* tuning in to the television (Lotz 2007, 2; Evans 2011, 34).

In order to survive the changes of the post-network era, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network broadened the appeal of their programs in an attempt to capture more viewers. I argue that Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network intentionally sought out adults audiences as a means of recuperating lost viewers through a strategy of multicasting. As defined by Julia Himberg in her book *The New Gay for Pay* (2017)*, multicasting* refers to the targeting of "several distinct audience demographics" through programming (Himberg 2017, 14). Multicasting is a "calculated approach to attracting viewers" that bases itself off of demographic data concerning white, upwardly mobile gays and lesbians. Himberg argues that Bravo and Showtime created programming like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007) and *The L Word* (2004-2009), respectively, in order to incorporate this supposed goldmine demographic into their viewership (Himberg 2017, 17-22). By creating programming with "multicast appeal," Himberg argues that these cable channels are able to serve the needs of their primary audiences of mature, white men and women while also incorporating a niche of affluent queer consumers into both their viewership and their brand identities (Himberg 2017, 30). Himberg's multicasting operates across viewing platforms, particularly the internet; Bravo and Showtime both relied on supplementary online content and interactive websites to appeal to the supposedly tech-savvy nature of the gay, niche audiences (Himberg 2018, 24-25). Though multicasting developed out of post-network era

economic anxieties, Himberg maintains that it also allowed Bravo and Showtime to incorporate more diverse sexualities into their programs – but I will return to this point in full later in the chapter.

Himberg positions her study of Bravo and Showtime adjacent to Lotz's idea of *narrowcasting* in the post-network era. The practice of narrowcasting involves shows that are "targeted to distinct and isolated subsections of the [general] audience"; both content and advertisements became targeted to niche factions of the audience, where these audiences are courted through specific content and then sold specific products (Lotz 2007, 5; 180). Himberg positions multicasting as a way for channels to effectively narrowcast without sacrificing any of their preexisting audiences. This balance in appeal to multiple demographics makes multicasting an apt model for theorizing how Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network were able to attract adult audiences to their programs without sacrificing any of their young, primary viewers. Although Himberg does not mention transmedia storytelling in her analysis of Bravo and Showtime, her study of how the two channels utilized different platforms and supplemental web content directly informs the way that character arcs, stories, and plots are developed across different media in these two cartoons – and how this transmedia development appeals to the particular consumption habits of adults.

By applying Himberg's multicasting to *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time*, I argue that these two shows use transmedia storytelling to attract adults as the niche counterpart to their primarily young audiences and, ultimately, bring more viewers back to the television screen. Geoffrey Long conceptualizes transmedia franchises as existing across primary and secondary "levels". The primary level of a text refers to the dominant core of a franchise while the secondary level refers to supplemental texts and mediums (Long 2007, 21). Long's conceptualization of these levels complements Jenkins'

theorization of the "mothership", or the center of a transmedia franchise (Jenkins 2014). For both, there is an implication of primacy; one medium will invariably be the dominant form of engagement within the franchise. In *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time*, the television show operates at the primary/mothership level, which makes it the most crucial aspect of the franchise. The secondary tier of these cartoons consists of ancillary media products, including comic books, video games, and novels. While the next chapter of this project deals more explicitly with these components, the use of secondary media by these cartoons reflects how Himberg's case studies sought audiences. Showtime and Bravo included supplemental web content in their programming because they wanted to attract the kinds of queer audiences that would be savvy and interested enough to navigate the websites. My case studies, as this chapter will demonstrate, incorporated hyperdiegetic appeal into their shows because they wanted to attract the dedicated adult audiences associated with other transmedia franchises.

Keeping Long's transmedia hierarchy in mind, transmedia storytelling's chief purpose is to support the primary level of these intellectual properties (IP). Though Himberg theorizes that multicasting facilitates diversity on cable television, I demonstrate that transmedia storytelling allows networks to split the "adult" appeal of their shows into secondary mediums through what I call *transmedia quarantining*. *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time* both feature (to different degrees) canonical relationships between non-white, female characters. In the same way that Bravo and Showtime used gay and lesbian characters to court gay and lesbians viewers, I contend that these characters specifically court queer women of color as audiences while keeping them at a safe distance from the primary component of the franchise. While Himberg thinks of multicasting as *facilitating* diversity, I think of multicasting as *commodifying* diversity. By diverting queer content away from television and into supplementary media, these shows have their cake

and eat it too. These channels are able to reap the benefits of multicasting, alleviate the risk associated with queerness, and still claim that their shows are diverse.

This chapter, then, will analyze the ways that adults are multicast in these two cartoons. First, I document the effects of the post-network era on Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network and consider the ways that they commodify queer women of color as an even smaller subset of the multicast adult audience. Next, I theorize the development of complex stories and hyperdiegesis in these two cartoons as part of their multicast appeal. By baking transmedia potential into the shows, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network were able to appeal directly to the invested adult audiences noted by Jason Mittell in his study of *Lost* (2004-2010) and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) (Mittell 2015). Multicasting allowed the channels to attract a niche adult audience through different mediums and storytelling strategies. This brought new viewers to the television screen while strengthening attachments among existing audiences to the IP.

Finally, this chapter will chart the development of self-censorship in cartoons as a way of theorizing my two case studies' management of the "risk" posed by queer representation. While multicasting as deployed by Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon offers content that specifically attracts queer women of color to these cartoons, the strategy also mandates that the networks prioritize children. This results in an implicit devaluation of queer women of color that places them at the fringes of the audience – a situation that is in direct contrast with Himberg's evaluation of multicasting as a facilitator of diversity. Ultimately, this chapter foregrounds multicasting and transmedia storytelling as strategies that inadvertently structure separate-but-equal dynamics for queer women of color in transmedia cartoons.

CARTOONS IN THE POST-NETWORK ERA

Lotz identifies three major eras in her historicization of the television industry: The Network Era, the Multi-Channel Transition, and the Post-Network Era (Lotz 2007, 8). The multi-channel transition, which refers to television starting in the 1980s and up through the "start" of the post-network era, is the most notable in terms of the development of Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network, as the two channels were able to crystallize their appeal to children during this time. Sarah Banet-Weiser documents some of Nickelodeon's success during this era in *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* (2007). Banet-Weiser emphasizes that, in the multi-channel transition, Nickelodeon offered kid-focused programming that wasn't restricted to the Saturday morning block (Banet-Weiser 2007, 54-55). Nickelodeon, which was established in 1979, started making content that appealed to the desires of kids as viewers during the 1980s. Programs like *You Can't Do That on Television* (1979-1990) and *Double Dare* (1986-1993)[6] were available all hours of the day. Because of this early decision to focus on the niche audience of kids, Nickelodeon was able to guarantee its success with them *before* the emergence of dozens of new, competing channels in the early 2000s (Banet-Weiser, 58; Lotz, 15). Animation became prominent at Nickelodeon during the 90s, and the channel primarily marketed itself as being "just for kids" in the 2-11 age range (Banet-Weiser, 180). Shows of this era ranged from *All That* (1994-2005) to *Rugrats* (1991-2004).

Cartoon Network, which launched in 1992, was able to capitalize on Nickelodeon's somewhat late adoption of animated programming with shows like *Dexter's Laboratory* (1995-2003) and *Courage the Cowardly Dog* (1996-2002). Jason Mittell's chapter on animation in *Genre and Television* (2004) characterizes the Cartoon Network of the multi-

[6] This date range refers to the first *Double-Dare* series; it has gone on hiatus several times, and is currently on-air (2018-present)

channel transition as identifying its niche in terms of genre, rather than audience or age bracket (Mittell 2004, 83). Rather than designating itself as a kid's network, Cartoon Network marketed itself as the place on cable for round-the-clock animation. Mittell argues that Cartoon Network specifically "mobilize[d] discourses of nostalgia and classicism to appeal to adults" through its unique blend of past and present cartoons during primetime television slots (Mittel 2004, 91). In doing so, the channel made separate programs that appealed to adults – a strategy that was in direct contrast with Nickelodeon. From the outset, Cartoon Network was defined by cartoons, intergenerational appeal, and an irreverent sense of humor (Mittell 2004, 84). Despite intentionally appealing to a wider demographic than Nickelodeon, however, the majority of Cartoon Network's audience was the same 2-11-year-old block of children (Banet-Weiser 2007, 181). To ensure that it was adequately catering to the children that made up nearly 70% of its audience, Cartoon Network created its Adult Swim block in 2001 as a means of differentiating between its viewers (Sandler 2003, 97; Mittell 2004, 86). This separation of "kids" cartoons from "adult" animation reinforces the idea that kids are still the bread and butter of Cartoon Network, despite how the channel markets itself, but technological changes in the post-network era destabilized the security the two channels found in these demographics.

New television technologies in the 2000s, including DVRs, on-demand video, and web video, significantly disrupted the linear viewing patterns upon which the two channels (and television in general) relied upon for so many decades (Lotz, 149). In her introduction to *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, Lotz includes an anecdote about a child citing "TiVo", the television recording technology, as his favorite channel (Lotz 2007, 2). Lotz's conversation about the effects of post-network era conditions is rooted in the early 2000s, but trade coverage of low ratings for these channels from 2011-2015 demonstrates the long-term impacts of such technological shifts. Discourses of economic hardship and wavering

views were especially frequent for Nickelodeon: *Variety* marked a "steep" drop in ratings at Nickelodeon in the fall of 2011 (Goldsmith 2012). Thanks to post-network era technologies like streaming and video on demand, audiences were increasingly able to circumvent the scheduling block effectively enough that Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network's ratings dropped as a result (Spangler 2013). Ratings summaries by *Forbes* pushed this trend further with reports of significant declines in viewership during 2014 and 2015 (Trefis 2014; Trefis 2015).

While Cartoon Network also suffered drops in ratings within the same time frame, the trades overwhelmingly focused on Nickelodeon's declines (Spangler 2013; 2015). This imbalance is likely due to management troubles and discourses of creative stagnation at Nickelodeon's parent company, Viacom (Thill 2015; Gillette and Shaw 2015). Gillette and Shaw, writing for Bloomberg, referred to Viacom as experiencing a "midlife crisis" during 2014 and 2015; Time Warner, Cartoon Network's parent company, did not garner the same amount of attention (2015). Despite these broader reports of ratings drops at Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network, both *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time* had amazingly high ratings while they were on air (Arrant 2012; Nordyke 2016). I argue that the success of these shows, despite the larger troubles of their parent channels, can be attributed to the shows' appeal to audiences outside of the standard 2-11 age bracket. This appeal is only articulated in some of the trade discourse around the shows, specifically from *Variety*. For *The Legend of Korra*, the attraction of adults to the franchise is connected directly to the esteem held toward *Avatar: The Last Airbender,* the preceding series (Edelsburg, 2012).When trades cover *Adventure Time,* they introduce the multicast appeal of the show in conversations about Cartoon Network's slate of new programming, with *Adventure Time's* adult appeal being a notable aspect of this formula for success (Lowry, 2012; Hopewell, 2014).

The ways that these two shows multicast has to do with their adoption of characteristics typically associated with "adult" television in the post-network era. One of the ways this was accomplished was through a combination of serialization and narrative complexity. Serialized cartoons weren't new to Cartoon Network or Nickelodeon by any means; the two had series like *Batman Beyond* (1999-2001) and *The Wild Thornberry* (1998-2004), respectively, but the combination of existing seriality with hyperdiegetic complexity speaks *was* new, and it spoke directly to the consumption habits of idealized adult audiences (Hills 2002; Jenkins 2006, 95). Hills describes the cultivation of hyperdiegesis in fiction as the "creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text" (Hills 2002, 104). Incorporating hyperdiegetic potential into *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time* primed the shows for development into transmedia franchises. While I do not mean to imply that younger viewers cannot enjoy vast story worlds and complicated character arcs, the cultivation of hyperdiegesis– which promises fulfillment via transmedia extension – specifically facilitates multicasting to adult audiences.

Transmedia Storytelling and Multi-generational Appeal

The Legend of Korra (2012-2014), the sequel to *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-2008), takes place in a world where some of the population – known as "benders" – are able to control one of four elements: earth, water, fire, and air. One person from every generation, the Avatar, is able to control all four elements. Set 70 years after the conclusion of *The Last Airbender*, *The Legend of Korra* deals with civic unrest in the face of technological innovation, blunt depictions of terrorism, and intra-group conflicts. *Adventure Time*, at its simplest, is about a boy named Finn and his best friend, Jake the Dog. In its eight-year run, *Adventure Time* has focused on the existence of different

dimensions, alternate timelines, and strife between different kingdoms. The opportunity to dive deeper into these worlds and characters through transmedia expansions caters specifically to the consumption habits associated with the mature audiences of complex franchises. Notably, the literature that studies transmedia storytelling overwhelmingly focuses on shows that are intended for adult viewers. Mittell, writing in *Complex TV* (2017), reinforces this emphasis on adult television in transmedia scholarship.

The main case studies of Mittell's chapter on transmedia television, *Lost* and *Breaking Bad*, skew mature (and male) in their viewerships (Mittell 2014). Mittell's main argument about these transmedia television shows is that they encourage meticulous, detail-oriented examinations of the various media components (Mittell 2014, 307-308). M. J. Clarke's *Transmedia Television* (2013) also focuses exclusively on shows intended for adults, including *Lost* (again), *Heroes* (2006-2010), and *Alias* (2001-2006). For Clarke, transmedia storytelling requires a certain amount of savvy on the part of audiences (Clarke 2013, 4). Adults are naturally positioned as the most suited to consuming a story that "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole," per Jenkins (2006, 95-96). Jenkins characterizes the audiences drawn to the hyperdiegetic richness of transmedia texts as possessing high levels of loyalty that most often result in the desire to collect and consume each of these multimedia forms; Clarke refers to this as dedication (Jenkins 2006, 95; Clarke 2013, 5).

The connection between transmedia storytelling and adults that these scholars make is predicated on the fact that these mediums are providing meaningful additions to the television shows in the form of new story arcs, developed characters, and narrative continuity – a strategy that is in direct contrast with the transmedia franchises typically associated with children. This early reputation of children's transmedia franchises comes from Marsha Kinder's work on media in the 1980s and 1990s. Counter to Jenkins'

definition in 2006, Kinder argues that transmedia expansions of children's franchises into television, toys, and games served the sole purpose of strengthening the child's consumer relationship to the text (Kinder 1991, 42-43). In Kinder's analysis, children's transmedia supersystems were utilized as means of providing opportunities for industries to generate revenue from children's connections to texts. The "program-length commercial" was the most extreme case of this emphasis on licensing and profit (Kinder 1991, 40). In Kinder's assessment, the only thing children's transmedia supersystems are doing is making selling points for children. To Clarke, writing nearly two decades later, the creation of selling points is only one component of a two-pronged strategy for creating television; Kinder, however, argues that this is the sole function. Clarke characterizes transmedia storytelling as being driven by economics and aesthetics, where the economic component of the strategy tries to funnel niche audiences back to the central locus of a transmedia property (Clarke 2013, 4-5; 9).

Jenkins reinforces this economic imperative in his *Wired TV* (2014) chapter "The Reign of the 'Mothership.'" The economic realities of the contemporary media industries (that is, industries in a post-network era) create "a strong incentive for content to be deployed across as many platforms as possible" (Jenkins 2014, 246). This deployment of content across multiple platforms is used to strengthen various niche audiences' connections with texts while also redirecting them back to the primary component/mothership from whence the transmedia expansions develop. Mittell further echoes this sentiment in *Complex TV* with his emphasis on transmedia storytelling's strengthening of connections between audiences and the television show (Mittell 2013, 294). What these scholars highlight is that transmedia storytelling and complex, serialized narratives are predominantly characteristics of *adult* television: even if they still serve profit motivations, transmedia stories in these shows provide unique content. By

incorporating these elements into *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time*, these kids' programs and their channels are able to appeal to the transmedia sensibilities of older audiences in a way that is distinct from Kinder's mainly profit-oriented assessment of transmedia stories for children.

While the programming slot for these two shows changed over the course of their time on-air, both cartoons were placed in the 7/8c programming block for at least one year each (Sands 2011; Raftery 2014). On Nickelodeon, *The Legend of Korra* was the last show to air before the channel's Nick@Nite programming block, which typically features re-runs of 1990s and 2000s-era sitcoms and episodes of *Spongebob Squarepants.* Nick@Nite, unlike Nickelodeon is characterized as being "appropriate for kids," rather than "just for kids" (Banet-Weiser 2007, 82-83). On Cartoon Network, the 7/8c slot came right before the nightly Adult Swim programming. This made *Adventure Time* a very plausible liminal space between Cartoon Network's blocks of content that didn't violate the sharp division between the two. *The Legend of Korra* functioned similarly, though the differences in content between Nick's schedule blocks were not nearly as stark as Cartoon Network's.

While these contemporary examples of transmedia storytelling already complicate Kinder's initial study of the phenomenon, this specific iteration of multicasting further nuances her analysis of the multi-generational appeal of children's franchises. In her analysis of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (*TMNT*) supersystem, Kinder argues that the "commodified multigenerational structure[s]" of children's supersystems entrench loyalty from children of different ages by spreading the IP across media with different target markets (Kinder 1991, 45; 131). In Kinder's *TMNT* case, older siblings and friends of different ages can participate in the franchise because of its wide generational appeal; the different modes of production from within the supersystem allow children to "grow up" with the franchise (Kinder 1991, 123). In my case studies, the allure of hyperdiegesis

reimagines *adults* as the far-end of this spectrum, rather than just a different generation of children, and the enjoyment of these adults is not contingent on their connection to the other end of the spectrum (Kinder 1991, 132).

The maintenance of this generational spectrum in *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time* shows how the two cartoons maintain a balance between the primary kid and multicast adult audiences. *Adventure Time* never shows content that would push it into Adult Swim territory. As the next chapter will show, the transmedia comics are suitable for readers of all ages. *The Legend of Korra* is a more complicated story: halfway through its third season, Nickelodeon removed the show from the air and streamed it exclusively through nick.com, the channel's website. Michael Dante DiMartino, one of the co-creators of the series, referred to the unannounced change as part of Nickelodeon's attempt to strengthen its digital presence at the 2014 San Diego Comic-Con. Despite this tumultuous distribution pattern, Nickelodeon eventually brought *The Legend of Korra* back on-air for its final season (Bricken 2014; Trendacosta 2014).

In multicasting cartoons to adults, age is the most important – and prominent – demographic. Because of this prioritization of age, the "adult" viewers of these cartoons may seem monolithic. These cartoons, however, feature canonically queer women of color, and the inclusion of this kind of representation complicates this monolithic categorization of adult niche audiences. Although television has an endemic problem with diverse representations in general, the lack of visibility for queer women of color is especially dire. GLAAD's Where We Are on TV report offers yearly demographic breakdowns of select cable television shows (GLAAD). In 2013, 3% of characters on cable were identified as being non-heterosexual; of this 3%, 72% of the characters were white (GLAAD 2013). The report does not offer breakdowns of gender within these statistics.

Because of the lack of diversity for queer women of color, cartoons that regularly offer this representation are understandably appealing to these viewers, even if the queerness is complicated by transmedia storytelling. In seeking representation where it can be found, queer women of color can be thought of as a sub-section of the already niche audience of adults watching Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon. Nielsen demographic research, also working from GLAAD's reports on television diversity, stresses the fact that queer characters track well in niche subsets of the audience (Nielson 2011). However, GLAAD's reports don't take the quality (or context) of representation into account when measuring characters, and there is a specific absence of children's media in these diversity reports. The suitability of queerness to cartoons further separates Himberg's study from mine. While Bravo and Showtime subsist on a mature viewership that has a significant contingent of queer people, Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon need viewership mainly from children, not queer audiences, in order to thrive (Himberg, 34; Banet-Weiser 2007).

The final section of this chapter will look at how the history of self-regulation in children's media effectively characterized queer content as a risk to the mothership of these transmedia franchises. While these shows exemplify how expansions into other mediums foster multigenerational/multicast audiences, they also reveal that economic considerations drive which narratives are left to the hyperdiegetic imagination of transmedia expansions. The divisions between creator desires and network anxieties become especially apparent in these conversations, as the exclusion of queer content is often articulated as an unfortunate outcome, rather than an explicit goal.

Having Our Cake and Eating It, Too

Within multicasting and transmedia strategies, maintaining the profitability – and widespread appeal - of the franchise's primary component is paramount. By expanding

their IP into other mediums, my case studies were able to secure and sustain niche, adult audiences while also re-routing attention back into the core of the franchise. The previous section explored the advantages associated with multicasting and transmedia on the basis of audience expansion. In this final section, I trouble Himberg's positive association between multicasting and diverse television. By using transmedia storytelling as a way of distancing potentially risky content away from the core of a franchise, these cartoons are able to claim that they offer representation through these transmedia connections without fully incorporating these identities into the television show. Returning to Himberg's analysis of Bravo and Showtime, she distinctly characterizes multicasting as a means of achieving diversity at the two channels, despite multiple references to Bravo and Showtime's characterization of gays and lesbians as a commodity audience (Himberg 2017, 14).

Himberg's specific deployment of multicasting relies heavily on the channels' branding strategies in relation to their content. She intentionally shies away from this commodification discourses in her assessment of how gay and lesbian audiences were incorporated into the brand identities of the two channels. However, for the cases she studies, multicasting was connected to unambiguous on-screen representation. The majority of *The L Word's* characters were queer women while *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* featured gay male professionals. Though I might argue that the quality of these representations is questionable, Himberg's analysis demonstrates that Bravo and Showtime ultimately provided their multicast audiences with tangible visibility on television. This is distinctly not the case in *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time*. Although these shows incorporate characters that are queer women of color, they also use transmedia storytelling to splinter the queer aspect of their identities off of television. While the shows multicast

to adults through complex narratives, queer women of color are specifically attracted through representation that is never completely fulfilled on television.

Lisa Parks' introduces the concept of *flexible microcasting* in her chapter of *Television After TV* (2004), which significantly predates multicasting. Parks' concept is similar to multicasting; flexible microcasting seeks out audiences on the basis of "social distinctions", which includes class, race, gender, age, and sexuality. She argues that the tailoring of television to these specific tastes "is ultimately about developing narrowly defined yet infinitely flexible content that commodifies layers of individual identity, desire, taste, and preference" (Parks 2004, 134). Unlike Himberg, Parks' concept is distinctly critical of the way that certain subsets of the audience are incorporated into programming. The commodification of audience identities in flexible microcasting is about securing viewers in the convergence between television and the internet first and fulfilling on-screen diversity second.

For Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network, attracting a loyal, obsessive, and general adult audience is the ultimate goal of multicasting. Queer women of color, however, are courted by the direct appeal to their unique social distinctions, much like lesbians were drawn to Showtime by lesbian representation on *The L Word*. By incorporating Parks' emphasis on profit into my use of multicasting, I stress that the commodification of secondary audiences and their identities in these two cartoons was primarily about securing dedicated adult viewers, rather than just diversifying. In my two case studies, however, representation for these multicast audiences is complicated by transmedia quarantining, which naturally creates distance between components of a franchise.

Writing for the kid's media trade *KidScreen,* Gary Rusak provides a lengthy examination of the potential advantages and risks of licensing media (2014). Using *The Lego Movie* (2014) as an example of an enormous success, Rusak explains that one of the

main risks associated with licensed media is the potential for the ancillary content to damage the core of the franchise (2014). Despite the fact that licensed children's media made billions of dollars in revenue in 2011, Rusak insists that these supplementary media can tarnish the reputation of the core medium if brands aren't careful to maintain enough distance between the different components (Dickson 2012; Rusak 2014). Rusak's work on licensing does not graft perfectly onto transmedia storytelling, but the idea that distance can keep the primary medium "safe" from potential risks informs these shows' particular use of transmedia storytelling. This is especially evident in *The Legend of Korra*, which was greenlit by Nickelodeon despite a disastrous movie adaptation of the original *Avatar* series (Levine 2010; Lowry 2012). For transmedia extensions of cartoons (bad movie adaptations included), the placement of these media as adjacent to the core television show offers enough distance that television does not suffer from the failures – or the risks- of these extensions. Transmedia extensions become a convenient place to experiment or offload potentially "risky" content.

Sarah Banet-Weiser provides two ways of thinking about the evolution of "risk" in children's television. First writing in *Kids Rule!* (2007), Banet-Weiser analyzes Nickelodeon programming from the mutli-channel transition. Looking at shows like *Hey Arnold!* (1996-2004) and *Dora the Explorer* (2000-2014), she demonstrates that the "risks" being taken by Nickelodeon at the time fell almost exclusively along the lines of gender parity and racial specificity. These risky representations were also imbricated in post-racial identity politics (Banet-Weiser 2007, 161-165). The programming on Nickelodeon in the multi-channel transition ultimately divorced racial identities from their political implications, and diversity did not exist outside of vague racial markers and gender identifications (Banet-Weiser 2007, 170).

In terms of sexuality, the Nickelodeon of the multi-channel transition only went so far as encoding gay camp into the subtext of some of its shows (Banet-Weiser, 188-189). Using a device called double-coding, the cartoons used tongue-in-cheek humor and imagery to encode messages to the adult audiences potentially watches these programs. However, these double-coded, campy jokes in shows such as *SpongeBob SquarePants* (1999-present) are specifically *not* representation. Double-coding is a way for cartoons to embed derisive messages about queer people that fly under the radars of young viewers; in *Spongebob Squarepants,* for example, double-coding often results in jokes about Spongebob's failed masculinity and effeminate (Banet-Weiser 2007, 178-179). Double-coding does not manifest in meaningful complications of the characters' sexual identities, and it is more often than not a joke made at the expense of queer people (Banet-Weiser, 190; Griffin 2017). Banet-Weiser revisits her earlier conceptualization of risk in her essay "Children's Television in a Post-Network Era*",* but her updated assessment of children's media in the post-network era foregrounded risks in kinds of programs, rather than kids of characters (Banet-Weiser 2009, 84). The diversity (and risk) that Banet-Weiser ascribes to children's media in the early 2000s still excluded queer representation. Despite the fact that Banet-Weiser speaks optimistically about the potential for post-network era kid's television, queerness is the unspoken exclusion.

Hearkening back to my anecdote about *Steven Universe* (2013-present) in the introduction to this project, there had not been an on-screen marriage between same-sex characters in cartoons until 2018. This is not to say that there have not been queer or queer coded characters in cartoons prior to titular episode. However, the discrete removal of queerness from *The Legend of Korra* and *Steven Universe* contributed to the idea that queer representation is "unsuitable" for children. According to Heather Hendershot, anything resembling homosexuality or queerness in children's media since the 1980s was flagged

by industrial censors, as queerness was often conflated with profanity, obscenity, and sexually inappropriate material (Hendershot 1998, 53-55). While I am by no means arguing that the transmedia quarantining of these queer characters is censorship, I stand by Hendershot's assertion that "Censorship is a *process* that is not merely repressive but also productive in its effects (original emphasis)" and that industry actors internalize and "reinscribe those anxieties" by preemptively removing any content – in this case, queer content – that might potentially be censored (Hendershot 1998, 58). What is produced in the wake of *actual* censorship of children's media is what Havens and Lotz refer to as "self-regulation"; in order to avoid being censored by the government, the television industry conditioned itself to avoid sensitive and "less commercially viable" content (Havens and Lotz 2016, 78). For kid's media, queerness falls squarely in both camps because of the aforementioned connection between queerness and obscenity.

Taking this history of internalized content standards from the 1980s to the 1990s into account, the creators of the *Avatar* franchise and *Steven Universe* have communicated the pushback that they received from Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network, respectively, in interviews and in personal blog posts. For example, Bryan Konietzko, co-creator and chief visual artist of the *Avatar* franchise, published a lengthy post to his personal Tumblr blog roughly a month after the finale of *The Legend of Korra.* The post both confirmed the relationship between Korra and Asami and reinforced the effects of self-regulation on queer representation. While Konietzko admits that he and his production team initially operated under an "unwritten rule" concerning on-screen confirmation of the romantic relationship, there was ultimately "a limit to how far we could go with it, as just about every article I read accurately deduced" (Konietzko 2014). This anxiety around queer content is more pronounced in *The Legend of Korra* because of the centrality of the queer women in question to the story. However, my reference in the introduction to Rebecca

Sugar's experiences with Cartoon Network allow us to imagine a similar reticence and set of "unwritten rules" at the channel during *Adventure Time's* life on-air (Romano 2018).

My use of risk, then, refers to queer representation and its perceived incompatibility with cartoons as a medium during the time my case studies were on-air. While it is impossible to determine whether or not the transmedia quarantining of character's sexualities is done intentionally, it isn't difficult to imagine that the specific quarantining of queerness into transmedia comics is an attempt for these networks to have their cake and eat it, too. While creator insights from Sugar and Konietzko demonstrate key creators' desire for the incorporation of queer characters into cartoons, the separating of this content away from the mothership and into an ancillary medium represents the networks' attempts at self-regulation through transmedia storytelling. With *The Legend of Korra* especially, the comics that canonized Korra and Asami's relationship came *three years* after the completion of the show (and conspicuously one year after same-sex marriage was legalized in the United States). What I want to impart with this chapter is that there is duplicity at work in these transmedia strategies. When channels are only comfortable with certain facets of characters' identities being on-screen, transmedia comics can create a paradigm of segregation. The next chapter engages fully with the specifics of comics in transmedia cartoons and further problematizes the manner in which transmedia strategies are used in these franchises.

Chapter 2

Queerness Sold Separately:

Transmedia Quarantining, Niche Audiences, and Licensed Comics

The previous chapter demonstrated how the adoption of multicasting practices in children's television arose as a means of combating audience fragmentation and industrial anxieties associated with television's shift into the post-network era. Transmedia storytelling, though not a new phenomenon, is one of the ways that these shows multicast to adult audiences across mediums, especially in the 2000s. In the primary component of *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time* franchises, children are the core audience and adults are niche. Transmedia expansion into comics provides the niche, adult audience with the hyperdiegetic content that is promised by the narrative complexity of the two shows. *Adventure Time* and *The Legend of Korra* both use comics to flesh out the hyperdiegesis of their story worlds, exploiting comics' seemingly natural affinity for transmedia storytelling.

Jenkins' essay "The Reign of the Mothership" characterizes transmedia practices as being "prefigured in the comics industry." Comics' suitability for transmedia expansion is a well-established tenet among many comics and transmedia scholars (Jenkins 2014, 253). For example, Shawn Kidman dedicates much of her book, *Comic Books Incorporated* (2019) to the historicization of this relationship between comics and transmedia storytelling, starting from the Golden Age (roughly 1930-1950s) and working her way up to the dominance of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and its various offshoots in the 2000s (Kidman 2019). Anthony Smith's *Storytelling Industries* (2018), while focused more generally on transmedia storytelling across media, often highlights comic books as one of the more paradigmatic industries through which transmedia storytelling can be

witnessed and has been studied (Smith 2018). In addition, Matthew Yockey's collection, *Make Ours Marvel* (2017), includes several essays that analyze the transmedia sprawl of the MCU that originates from Marvel comics (Yockey 2017).

In the introduction to this collection, Yockey applies Paul du Gay's idea that "forms of economic life are cultural phenomena" to Marvel comic readers and writers (Yockey 2015, 26). Yockey argues that the cultural identity of Marvel comics was co-constituted by the identities of comics producers *and* readers during the 1960s (Yockey 2019, 26). Matthew Pustz argues that this kind of identity formation was happening at other publishers into the 1990s, and Kidman (Pustz 1999, 108-109. Because comic book fans eventually turned into creators, mainstream superhero comics (and their readers) became incredibly homogenous from industrial *and* cultural perspectives (Pustz 1999, 106). Kidman characterizes these 1990s-era mainstream audiences as being affluent, white men with significant purchasing power, and she and Derek Johnson both indicate that this homogeneity has persisted into the late 2000s (Kidman 2019, 150; Johnson 2015, 141). This industrial and cultural dominance of white men in comics makes them the implied audience for these transmedia comics. Because of their licensed nature, however, *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time* comics recreate the multicasting dynamics of television and ultimately prioritize *children* as their primary audience.

The Legend of Korra and *Adventure Time* comics fit into the kind of licensed property where the character originate from other kinds of media (Rogers 1999, 134). These transmedia comics are meant to strengthen existing audiences' attachments to the primary medium while also attracting the advantageous, medium-specific audiences to the franchise (Long 2007, 29; Evans 2011, 24). Although adults are being catered to through transmedia storytelling methods and hyperdiegesis, these comics still prioritize children as their primary audience. This dynamic – which mirrors my conversation of multicasting

from chapter 1 – fits into what Nicolas Pillai refers to as one of the "inviolable aspects" of licensed comics (Pillai 2013, 108). They facilitate the expansion and complication of their parent media, but they inevitably must support the economic incentives of the franchise, whether that be through establishing brand recognition or broadening the scope of the franchise (Pillai 2013, 105).

Even though adult readers are the desirable niche most closely associated with the medium, these comics must still be legible to children. Like in post-network era television, these licensed comics cultivate readerships that exist on a broad/niche dichotomy, where the audiences of *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time* franchises are broader than those of comics as a medium. Kidman identifies this dynamic as a "structuring paradox" of transmedia comics (Kidman 2019, 3). Balancing the need to appeal to children with the desire to incorporate the valuable, prototypical comic reader inevitably prioritizes some audiences over others. Because these contemporary comics cater to children first and mainstream comic readers (as in white, adult men) second, they compound the devaluation of queer women of color as audiences. Queer women of color, who are already pushed off of television, are marginalized again in licensed comics that do not prioritize them as audiences.

By attending to the specific cultural, industrial, and economic conditions of transmedia comics, this chapter will interrogate why comics are suitable for hyperdiegetic expansion of cartoons while also determining the problematics of this specific use. Understanding why comics are used by networks to quarantine queerness requires a careful breakdown of the unique offerings of comics in the transmedia systems of *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time*. This chapter will start broadly by exploring the establishment of synergy between cartoons and licensed comics in terms of different modes of interaction between the two mediums, engaging chiefly with narrative and aesthetic similarities. Next,

I focus on the development of audiences for different levels of publishers within the industry, priming my subsequent conversation concerning how multicasting functions in comic books, rather than television. Then, I look at how Dark Horse Comics and BOOM! Studios market these all-ages comics. The relationship between how publishers identify the consumers of their comics and the low thresholds to success for sales of these books will inform my discussion of how the particular economics of comics allow franchises to effectively quarantine queerness away from television without engendering any real financial (or social) risk. In this way, the benefits of transmedia comics become imbricated in their problematics. Finally, this chapter will conclude by addressing the challenges transmedia comics pose for queer women of color. Despite the fact that these transmedia comics are used to develop stories featuring queer women of color, readers that are queer women of color are not the primary audience. If they want the full effect of representation, queer women of color are forced to navigate a new medium and participate in the all-ages subgenre that does not prioritize them as readers.

FROM CHANNEL TO PANEL: THE AESTHETIC SYNERGY OF CARTOONS AND COMIC BOOKS

One of the primary factors that makes comics books an advantageous medium for transmedia expansion is the synergy that exists between comics and cartoons. Pillai, writing about *The X-Files* (1993-2002) comics, argues that licensed comics "mobilise memory of the parent medium (television) *symbiotically* rather than parasitically" (Pillai 2013, 105). He notes that the symbiosis between *The X-Files'* licensed comics and television show are facilitated by narrative and aesthetic similarities between the two; for *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time*, these similarities become even more pronounced (Pillai 2013, 106). Because both media are drawn, there is a "visual consistency" between

the two that "dissolve[s] existing barriers to transmedia and transgenerational comic book consumption" (Johnson 2015, 150). This visual consistency is especially important for children; if character designs vary too much between mediums, young comic readers won't make connections in their minds between the two transmedia components (Johnson, 150). The character designs in *Turf Wars* and *Marceline and the Scream Queens,* while having some variations in overall style, are remarkably similar to the ones seen on both shows.

Marceline and the Scream Queens, written and illustrated by webcomic author Meredith Gran, was first published by BOOM! Studios from July to December of 2012. The comic is a special six-issue run of BOOM!'s general *Adventure Time* (2012-present) series, which began two years after the show began in 2010. In the comic, Bubblegum offers to work as manager for Marceline's band, and the group tours the land of Ooo playing gigs and dealing with the ups and downs of life as a musician. The comic's main focus is on Marceline's frustration with critics of her music, especially Bubblegum's seeming lack of respect for the band's rock n' roll lifestyle (which primarily consists of sleeping in, partying, and devoting very little time to the press or promotion). As Bubblegum becomes closer to Marceline's bandmates and excels at her manager job, Marceline cracks under the pressures of her newfound fame and eventually goes on a monstrous rampage during a show (Gran 2012). The comic spends a lot of time vaguely alluding to Marceline and Bubblegum's past, which is consistent with how *Adventure Time* deals with their backstories. *Marceline and the Scream Queens* fits seamlessly into the overarching narrative of the cartoon by way of not disrupting any major story arcs. It builds the backstories of Marceline and Bubblegum without firmly establishing itself in relation to the timeline of the show. As Illustration 1 shows, the striking visual similarities between the comic and the cartoon make it so that readers can transition between mediums just as seamlessly as they might move between stories:

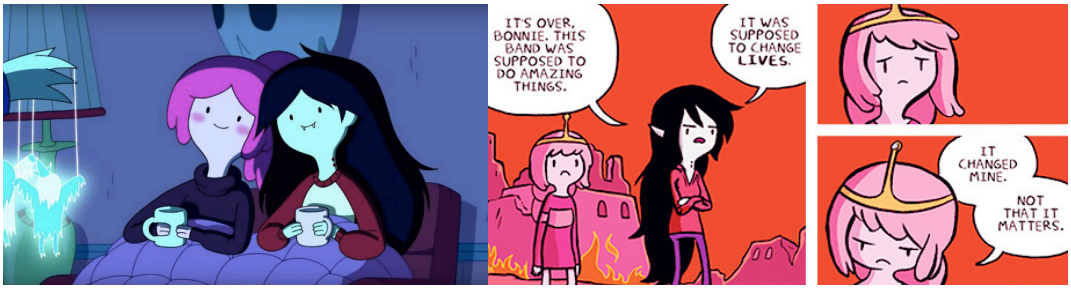

Illustration 1: Screen capture from "Come Along With Me" (S9E13), *Adventure Time* and panels from *Marceline and the Scream Queens,* respectively

Marceline and the Scream Queens features mini-stories in the trade paperback from guest artists, and the styles of these shorts are quite distinct from Gran's. What saves these short stories from interrupting the visual consistency of the comics is that nearly all of them focus on characters other than Marceline and Bubblegum. For young readers seeing the comics on the shelves of the all-ages section, panels featuring Marceline and Bubblegum will have the same artistic synergy that is visible in Illustration 1 (ICV2 2013).

Turf Wars is similarly consistent with the narrative and style of its source material. Narratively, *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars, Part One* functions more as the "fifth season" of *The Legend of Korra,* picking up where the fourth season left off in the show. Published by Dark Horse comics in 2017 and written and illustrated by Michael Dante DiMartino and Irene Koh, respectively, *Turf Wars* explores Korra and Asami's burgeoning relationship and the ramifications of the show's final season, where an enormous portal to the spirit realm was opened in the middle of Republic City, the primary location of the series. As the title suggests, Korra and her friends are faced with displaced refugees, gang wars, and greedy land owners that are all vying for a place – or control – of Republic City and the newly opened portal. Similar to my discussion of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* comics in Chapter 1, DiMartino's *Turf Wars* seamlessly picks up where his show left off.

However, the hand-drawn quality shared by the comics and cartoons alleviates what Dru Jeffries identifies as the "pressures of fidelity" that are often associated with transmedial adaptations of live-action shows into comics (2017, 7).

Unlike *The Long Way Home* (2007), the eighth season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the hurdles of parsing the visual and stylistic differences between comics and live-action television are removed. Jeffries identifies Levèfre's work on the "ontological incompatibilities" of comics and live-action film as a significant drawback of transmedia comics; *Turf Wars'* consistency with its cartoon source material overcomes this ontological incompatibility (Jeffries 2017, 8). What does throw an ontological wrench into these transmedia adaptations is the fact that comics tend to change artists frequently, even within single issues. Indeed, Irene Koh is responsible for drawing all of *Turf Wars* except the cover, which was done by Heather Campbell and Jane Pak. However, as seen in Illustration 2, the cover of the comic is practically identical to Konietzko's art in the television series:

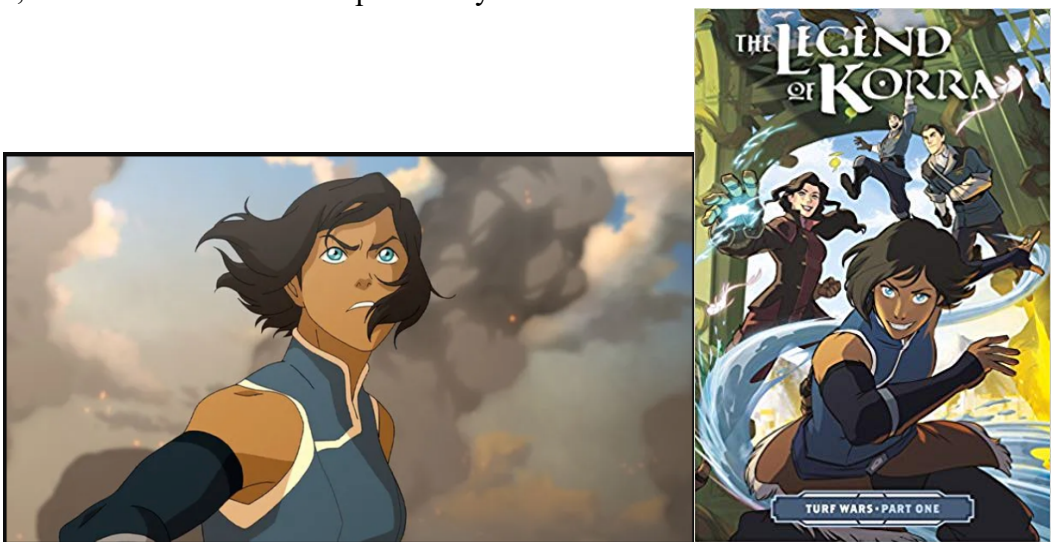

Illustration 2: Screen capture from "Day of the Colossus" (S4E12), *The Legend of Korra* and the cover of *Turf Wars: Part One,* respectively

Much like with *Marceline and the Scream Queens*, one can immediately recognize *Turf Wars'* connection to *The Legend of Korra* upon first glance at the cover (Illustration 2). Although Koh's internal artwork slightly differs from the cover art (and, by extension, Konietzko's work for the show), the cover establishes a direct connection to the art of the show that smooths the minimal stylistic differences between Koh and Konietzko.

Avatar: The Last Airbender belongs to Nickelodeon, and *The Legend of Korra* is no exception (Flinn 2015). The back of *Turf Wars* proudly features the Nickelodeon label, and trade coverage prior to the release of the comic called the series a partnership between Dark Horse and Nickelodeon (Flinn 2015; ICv2 2016). The backmatter of the comic directs readers towards other *Avatar*-related content while the back cover of the book calls the comic "the official continuation of *The Legend of Korra"* (DiMartino 2017). *Marceline and the Scream Queens'* attachments to Cartoon Network are less overt than Nickelodeons, with small labels for the network featured in the frontmatter and on the back cover of the trade paperback. Regardless of the size of the logos, the comics still belong to Cartoon Network (ICv2 2011). Through these network attachments, both comics effectively reinforce the television core of their respective franchises (Dickson 2017). These secondary texts are always trying to convert the niche readers of comics into television viewers and strengthen the connection between the television show and the comics (Johnson 2015, 152; Pustz 1999, 89). These overriding attachments to channels are paramount in understanding how the publishers of these comics market their books.

MARVEL, DC, AND EVERYONE ELSE: DARK HORSE AND BOOM! STUDIOS

Kidman's idea of structuring paradoxes is one of the guiding frameworks for this chapter. These paradoxes function almost identically to multicasting in television, where a transmedia comic book casts a wide net in an attempt to secure newer, niche audiences

without alienating the established primary market. Within this paradox, as in multicasting, the primarily young audiences of licensed comics take precedence over the adult readers typically associated with the genre – because of this, adults become the "niche" counterpart to children. This privileging of the primary market automatically locates these niche audiences at the peripheries of the text, where their wants, needs, and desires are secondary to those of the major market (Pustz 1999, 204). Because these IP belong to Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network, the comics are beholden to the incentives of the television industry; multicasting imperatives overrule medium-specific demographic designations. While Dark Horse and BOOM! Studios are independent publishers in the grand scheme of the comics industry, they are informed by their licensed relationship to networks.

Mainstream comics have become synonymous with superheroes because of the dominance of Marvel and DC in the industry. Often referred to as the "Big Two" in comics publishing because of their "nearly 65%" share of the market, Marvel and DC have a near-monopoly on comics publishing (Perren 2015, 232). The March 2019 share reports from Diamond Comic Distributors, the sole distributor of comics in the United States and a major provider of industry statistics, shows that these numbers have remained consistent (Diamond 2019). Benjamin Woo's article "Is There A Comic Book Industry?" laments the fact that this association has led industry scholars to establish the two publishers as the "mainstream" of comics and independent comics as "*whatever mainstream comics are not"* (emphasis original) (Woo 2018, 32). The binary of mainstream vs. independent cannot account for the relationships that Dark Horse and BOOM! have with the networks that own the rights to the IP in their comics, however. Diamond refers to both as "premier publishers" - even though they barely account for 6% of the market share combined[7], they

[7] The difference in shares is 1.07% in favor of Dark Horse

are on the heels of Marvel and DC in terms of industry dominance (Diamond 2019). In line with Diamond's terminology, I refer to Dark Horse and BOOM! as premier publishers to account for their relationships with networks.

Per their websites, both Dark Horse and BOOM! Studios define themselves as purveyors of licensed and genre comics. Dark Horse, the older of the two, started in comic retail in 1986. Over time, the publisher has come to pointedly associate itself with licensed media, mentioning franchises like *Alien* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* comics in the history section of its website (darkhorse.com). Dark Horse's website does not categorize the comics according to age, genre, gender, or any other metric. However, when searching the website, terms such as "children", "kids", or "Nickelodeon" will return results related to the *Avatar* franchise, including *Turf Wars*. This indexing system alludes to the fact that Dark Horse is tacitly categorizing *Turf Wars* according to age (darkhorse.com).

BOOM! Studios is a significantly different story. BOOM! Studios started in 2005 and offers a balance between original titles and licensed properties, with its relationship to 20th Century Fox foregrounded in its "About" section. BOOM! notes a goal to provide comics "for all ages" in its mission statement. The publisher is broken down according to "imprints" that correlate to subsections of the publisher's audience; BOOM! is the overarching publisher identity, with kaBOOM! representing the imprint aimed at middle-school (7-11) – this imprint publishes the *Adventure Time* comics (Griepp 2017). When looking at these comics on BOOM!'s website, they are collected under the kaBOOM! imprint, rather than simply "BOOM!", which signals their appropriateness (and intentional marketing towards) younger children. Additionally, the *Marceline and the Scream Queens* features kaBOOM! on the spine of the trade paperback (boom-studios.com). Despite these different imprints, the website is not organized accordingly, and the imprint designation for a comic is only apparent once you have found a series that one might be interested in.

Diamond's premier label automatically differentiates Dark Horse and BOOM! from the rest of the comics ecosystem, and the relationship they have to licensed media further distinguishes them from other independent publishers of all-ages comics. Children became the primary readers of comics during the 1950s, when the medium was subjected to censorship that effectively declawed the medium (Kidman 2019, 14). These regulations aimed to make comics "safe" for children through simple, wholesome superhero stories (Pustz 1999, 26-29). While there were ebbs and flows in the main target demographics of superhero comics in subsequent decades, Fox's *X-Men* and Sony's *Spider-Man* film franchises in the early 2000s brought adult, white men squarely back onto the radar of the Big Two as transmedia comic consumers (Kidman 2019, 42;184). Additionally, licensed properties, particularly in film, started to become massively successful at the time, and the Big Two were careful to cater to the tastes of an aging audience of white men (Johnson 2015, 147-148).

As a result, outlying identities – children, women, people of color, and queer people – became the purview of independent publishers, who made their careers out of appealing to these niche audiences at the fringes of mainstream superhero comics (Pustz 1999, 25-28; Whaley 2016). Pustz characterizes independents during the 90s and 00s as being free from the corporate incentives that guided the Big Two. This freedom from conglomerate imperatives and relationships allowed them to publish very different stories than Marvel and DC (Pustz 1999, 67). Deborah Elizabeth Whaley's *Black Women in Sequence* (2016) describes independent black comic strips as sites of radical visibility for black women that that provided "counternarratives" to exploitative and racist depictions often found in other comic genres, paying specific attention to landmark works like *The Boondocks* (1996-2006) (152). Justin Hall's *No Straight Lines* (2015) anthologizes the history of queer comics by organizing them into eras with thematic underpinnings and

specific sociopolitical contexts, drawing particular attention to notable authors like Alison Bechdel, author/illustrator of *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983-2008) (Hall 2015). What is notable about this anthology is that these queer comics were specifically aimed at mature audiences until the mid 2000s, when the all-ages webcomic *The Princess* (2009-2017) became popular (Hall 2015, 14).

This isn't to say that the Big Two haven't had diverse heroes, but for Marvel and DC, more diverse audiences were – and still are - courted from *within* the mainstream genre of superhero comics, rather than through stories tailored to the identities of their readers. The crystallization of superheroes as part of popular culture brought on new generations of casual readers that "pushed" some affluent, white, adult men out of the superhero genre and into alternative comics (Kidman 2019, 176; Pustz 1999). Paul Lopes notes that many of these white men turned to independent publishers in search of artistic integrity during the 1980s and 1990s; since they revered comics as an art form, they felt that superhero comics cheapened the aesthetic and narrative potentials of the medium (Lopes 2009, 129-130). Because of their spending power and social status, these white men were appealing to independents as legitimators and stabilizers, and many publishers – including Dark Horse - adapted their content to appeal to them more explicitly (Kidman 2019, 155; 164).

As I stated earlier in this section, multicasting informs the primary audiences of the transmedia comics published by Dark Horse and BOOM! Studios. Where children are the primary audience, affluent white men that were "pushed out" of superhero comics are the more desirable niche. The next section delves into the economic viability of transmedia comics by looking at how they have helped alleviate the risk that queerness poses to the television show. I argue that the imperatives of multicasting and profit-making encourage these premier publishers to appeal to the primary audience of children first and this medium-specific, preferred audiences of affluent white men second. Despite the queerness

of *Turf Wars* and *Marceline and the Scream Queens*, queer women of color are not prioritized as target audiences in multicasting frameworks.

Designed with Who in Mind?: "Comic-onomics" and Alleviated Risk

Drawing again from Clarke's description of transmedia storytelling as a deliberate strategy that provides media industries with more stability, extends the reach of their intellectual properties, and incorporates more audiences, it is evident that the comic components of these shows' transmedia systems do an immense amount of risk management (Clarke 2013). Kidman extensively historicizes how comics and other mediums (particularly film) stabilize one another in *Comics Incorporated*. While she does not expressly use the language of multicasting, her assessment of how television and comics supported and reinforced one another is rooted in how the media balanced their desire to appeal to primary and niche audiences in a way that directly mirrors the multicasting in television (Kidman, 177; Himberg 2018).

When paired with the low threshold to success, this stability makes comics a distinctly safe venture for transmedia storytelling. The support that films and comics offer one another can also be seen in television, especially when the massive disparities in revenue between comics and broadcast are taken into consideration. In 2013 alone, Alisa Perren clocked the revenue generated by the comics industry at 770 million, whereas the broadcast networks raked in a cool 1.6 billion (Perren 2013, 232). The threshold for financial success is dramatically lower in comic books, particularly when one considers that Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network alone deal in the millions when it comes to viewers (Kissell 2013). According to Diamond's monthly and yearly summaries of the best-selling comics for each period, sales ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 are indicative of a good turnout for Dark Horse and BOOM! Studios (Diamond). This is reinforced by both Comichron's

market data, publisher interviews with ICv2, and Comics Beat's assessment of success for premier publishers (Comichron; Allen 2016). ICv2 identified kid's comics as "the future of everything" in a 2012 press release concerning the ICv2 Conference on Comics (ICv2 2012). This promise of exponential growth in kid's comics was reinforced by coverage in 2015, which marked consistently high sales for kid's comics (Griepp 2015). Notably, ICv2's research does not delineate between licensed and original comic titles.

Speaking for Dark Horse comics, associate editor Shantel Larocque pegged the *Avatar* family of comics as one of their most consistent licensed comic series. Comichron's assessment of *Turf Wars'* sales placed the first volume of the series as #47 on a list of the 300 top-selling trade paperbacks for 2017 – but the collected first issue is listed as being just short of 10,000 units sold (Griepp 2017; Miller 2017). For *Adventure Time's* large family of comics, BOOM! Studios executives describe the comics as having "big sales velocity," which is reinforced by the placement of multiple *Adventure Time* comic titles on Comichron's 2013 sales summary, where the trade paperback of *Marceline and the Scream Queens* sold roughly 7,000 units and was #81 out of the list of 300 (ICv2, 2013; Miller 2013).

Where risk – and the alleviation thereof – comes into play is in the fact that these comics are on the periphery of the transmedia system. Because the queer content of *Marceline and the Scream Queens* and *Turf Wars* are separated from the shows by textual boundaries, the networks can collect the audiences of premier publishers while still maintaining the sanctity of the television show. In other words, the comics are integrated enough into the franchise for the networks keep their distance from queerness without losing out on any transmedia advantages. Suzanne Scott writes about the potential for ancillary content models – in my case, comic books – to provide a "less commercially charged space to explore homoerotic storylines" (2013, 326-327). As I noted above,

licensed comics published through Dark Horse and BOOM! don't have to sell many copies to succeed – but it is for this exact reason that depositing queerness in comics is troubling. If the comics were to fail, they are distant enough from the primary medium that any failure will likely not work its way back to the cartoons. When they succeed, the queerness therein is still connected to the television on a *transmedia* basis, and networks are able to scoop up readers and potential attract new viewers as well. However, in distancing risky queer content through medium, queer characters are inevitably pushed to the "periphery of the narrative," or, in this case, the periphery of the transmedia franchise (Scott, 327).

Writing about a similar case of transmedia quarantining in *Star Wars: Forces of Destiny,* Megen de Bruin-Molé emphasizes that transmedia texts "play a powerful role in expanding the reach of a franchise, but also send a clear message about what kinds of communities are central…and which are merely peripheral" (Bruin-Molé 2018, 9). Despite the queer exposition done by *Turf Wars* and *Marceline and the Scream Queens,* these stories can only occupy a "strictly defined space" on the outskirts of the transmedia franchise as a whole; simply put, these stories are worth developing, but are not seen as viable for a place on the mothership (Bruin-Molé 2018). These test cases open up the potential that, despite premier publishing's ability to release diverse stories, efforts at inclusion in transmedia comics will always cater to the primary audiences of those franchise – which, in these two cases, are children. The final section of this chapter will reconcile how the devaluation of queer women of color is compounded by the fact that transmedia quarantining mandates their move to the comics in order to achieve representation.

Border Patrol: Comics, Queer Women of Color, and Boundary Policing

Because licensed comics are beholden to the corporate objectives associated with the parent companies of the franchises, the ability of premier comics publishers to provide diverse, nuanced, and politically resonant stories similar to the ones studied by Whaley, Hall, and others is limited. Licensors are constrained by the imperative of IP holders to cater to the comics' primary child audience, rather than focusing specifically on the identities that are actually reflected in the stories. Queer women of color, who possess multiple, interfacing identities, are subject to constant re-marginalization at the hands of multicasting strategies in both cartoons *and* comics. The homogeneity of mainstream comics as a medium and a subculture was constructed through the narrative, social, and industrial exclusion of women over several decades (Kidman 2019, 147). The cultivation of a heterosexual, white, and male identity for superhero comics has led to strong cultural associations between this group and the medium itself (Kidman 2019, 150).

Kidman channels Bordieu's work on taste and culture in her assessment of how cultural identities are developed around comics, stating that "The workers who produced comic books and the fans who read them were imprinting their tastes onto the medium and, along with their tastes, their social and cultural status" (Kidman 2019, 152). Television is another permutation of this industrial and representational homogeneity, and GLAAD's Where We Are on TV report offers yearly demographic breakdowns of television that reinforce its continuation (GLAAD 2013). In 2013, 3% of characters were identified as being non-heterosexual; of this 3%, 72% of the characters were white (GLAAD 2013). While the report is useful for illustrating representational disparities on television, it does not interrogate the nature of that representation, and the 2013 report in particular does not have a statistic dedicated solely to queer women of color. The report from 2019 shows that this 3% representation for queer people has increased to 8.8% on cable, but there is still no

data dedicated to queer women of color. Of the 8.8% of queer characters, women and people of color each make up roughly half of these characters, but there is no way to account for queer people that also identify as female (GLAAD 2019).

Multicasting, which operates in television and comics (although not identically, as discussed above), relegates stories featuring queer women of color to the outer edges of *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time*. By transmedially quarantining the queerness of characters from these franchises, queer women of color must navigate a medium with different levels of literacy, boundary policing, and hostilities. First, Pustz notes that there is a specific kind of contempt that comic readers (read: the adult, white men associated with comics) have for people who come to comics from other mediums (Pustz 1999, 210). For queer women of color, who are forced into comics in order to get representation for shows they are already invested in, these hostilities reinforce their status as outsiders to the texts they're consuming and the mediums those texts are published through. These comics, by virtue of being marketed to "all-ages," are literally segregated in the physical space of the comic shop. Even though the characters are adults, and the stories in the comics are focused on romance, queer women of color – who are intentionally attracted as part of a multicast audience – must look for representation in a space that caters to children (Pustz 80).

Comics require a particular set of literacies, not just in terms of reading them but also in navigating the physical (or digital) space of a comic shop. Because of the proliferation of different stories, miniseries, and variant covers underneath one single "title" of a comic, someone seeking out the queer content associated with these two cartoons must know exactly which titles they are looking for in order to successfully find them. The literacy required to read comics does not even get at the expense of them; a single, 22-page issue can cost upwards of $5.00 USD. While trade paperback collections

are more reasonably priced, they are still expensive when compared to print books (Pustz 1999,; Johnson 2017, 142). In quarantining these stories to comic books, queer women of color are required to invest capital in a separate medium in order to get a holistic idea of these characters as queer women of color.

The final chapter of this project, then, engages with how the pleasurable assemblage of hyperdiegetic information is transformed into labor by the constant devaluation of queer women of color in these transmedia franchises. Building off of the problematics of multicasting, this last chapter will conduct a textual analysis of *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time* by looking at how identities are communicated *prior to* transmedia intervention. By analysis the content of the television shows in conjunction with the transmedia expansions, I demonstrate that these characters' identities are incomplete without these additional components, which reinforces the idea that the gathering of transmedia components is labor, rather than pleasure.

Chapter 3

Constructing Cartoon Women:

Does This Count?

The previous chapters have engaged with how both the television and comics industries to contextualize my case studies use of transmedia comics. This discussion was meant to foreground medium specificity prior to engaging with the actual content of the shows – and the moments of transmedia quarantine - themselves. By first exploring the economic and industrial contexts surrounding the use of transmedia storytelling, I have shown how transmedia storytelling facilitates television's separation of certain content away from the mothership medium of *Adventure Time* and *The Legend of Korra.* Charting these transmedia strategies demonstrates that gaps in time and shifts in medium obfuscate the identities of these characters. While transmedia storytelling through comic books complicates our understanding of these characters as queer women of color, I argue that there are already roadblocks to this comprehension in the shows' narratives. It is challenging enough to trace a character arc through mediums, and this challenge becomes even more difficult when we examine the complicated process of identity formation in the shows' narratives.

In this final chapter, I examine how these identities are dismantled by changes in narrative and medium and challenge transmedia storytelling's generally positive reputation as a facilitator of creativity and narrative cohesion (Evans 2011, 20). In my two case studies, the development of a narrative across mediums through transmedia storytelling results in the distancing of queer content away from television. Importantly, the textually constructed identities of Korra, Asami, Bubblegum, and Marceline are heavily obscured *prior to* any quarantining interventions made by comic books. Queer women of color

struggle enough to be present on television, as the GLAAD report from 2013 demonstrated. Any barriers to clarity in the few characters that queer women of color are afforded makes the separation of these identities by industrial stratagems even more troubling.

This chapter, then, looks at how – and to what extent - *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time* communicate the identities of their characters. I speak to the conspicuous dispersal of queer visibility across mediums diminishes these constructions of identity. In order to address the specificity of representation in cartoons, I place Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' idea of the "imagination gap" in young adult media in conversation with Kristen Warner's concept of "plastic representation" (Thomas 2019; Warner 2017). Writing in the introduction to her book *The Dark Fantastic* (2019), Thomas notes a failure in the imagination of the creative industries that results in an enduring lack of diversity in children's and young adult media, which she calls an "imagination gap" (6-7). This failure in imagination leads not only to diminishing self-esteem in children, but a narrow conception of the world as it is. By omitting marginalized identities from stories targeted at young adults and children, Thomas argues that audiences slowly lose the ability to imagine a place for diversity in real and fictional world(s) (Thomas 2019). The imagination gap, then, refers specifically to the exclusion of diverse characters in the speculative and fantastical subgenre of children's/young adult media. Warner, meanwhile, identifies many instances of representation in media where the use of black actors allows media producers to claim that they are answering a call to diversity while "obliterating context and sidelining any consideration of depth"; this superficial diversity demonstrates that "images in the era of representation matters become hollowed, malleable signs with artificial origins. Their artificiality connects to a condition that could be termed 'plastic representation'" (6).

While Warner's plastic representation is visible across a media spectrum ranging from film to music videos, her concept does not perfectly graft onto cartoons because of

their animated nature. All of Warner's examples - which include Jay-Z's *Moonlight* (2017) music video, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) and the Broadway production *Hamilton* – involve real actors and the lack of contextual depth that results from plastic representation (Warner 2017). For *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time*, the reading of race (and other facets of identity) into the characters requires attention to worldbuilding and visual cues in the absence of physical actors. Here, Thomas' imagination gap – which pays specific attention to the way that identity is communicated in fictional children's/young adult media – accounts for the different representational possibilities and challenges presented by these cartoons, their fictional worlds, and their animated women. In the absence of racial identities determined by actors, we must look at the specific constructions of race, gender, and sexuality within these two show's respective stories in order to identify how, if, and when Korra, Asami, Marceline, and Bubblegum are coded as queer, identified as women, or assigned racial identities.

By engaging with these transmedially quarantined characters as plastic representations of queer women of color, I argue that the separation of character identities in *The Legend of Kora* and *Adventure Time* contributes to this gap in cultural imagination and representation for queer women of color. The distance created by transmedia quarantining parallels the gap Thomas identifies in imagination between the real world and fictional ones, and the lack of depth that results from an incomplete identity on screen – that is, a plastic representation – makes it so that these characters *cannot* be true representations without patient and mandatory assembly by readers and watchers. Jenkins characterizes this assembly as one of the pleasures associated with transmedia storytelling, but this pleasure is predicated on the fact that "going in deep" to understand and enjoy a text cannot be mandatory (2006, 130). Because this assembly *must* be done to piece

together these character's identities, the possibility of transmedia expansion is transformed into labor that disproportionately affects already-underrepresented queer women of color.

THE LEGEND OF KORRA AND *TURF WARS*

As discussed earlier, *The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014) was created by Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino as a sequel set 70 years after the critically acclaimed *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, which aired on Nickelodeon from 2005 to 2008. Both series are set in the same universe where a portion of the population has the ability to control one of four elements: fire, earth, air, and water. The world is divided into four nations that correspond to these elements, and each draws inspiration from Eastern Asian and indigenous cultures, religions, and dynasties. The cities in the Fire Nation draw influence from Imperial Japan; the Northern and Southern Water Tribes are meant to reflect Inuit and other polar indigenous communities; and the Earth Kingdom's main city, Ba Sing Se, is based directly off of China's Forbidden City. The movements that the benders use to manipulate the elements also reflects various martial arts styles, while the philosophy of the Air Nomads is meant to represent Buddhism (Clark 2018). The individuals who are able to control one of the four elements are referred to as "benders", and each generation has an Avatar that is able to control all four of the elements. Each Avatar is a reincarnation of the prior, with Korra being the inheritor of the title after Aang, who was the main protagonist of *The Last Airbender*.

Korra and Asami are visually characterized as non-white in their: Korra has dark brown skin and hair that are signatures of the Water tribes, while Asami has black hair, angular features, and yellow undertones to her skin. While it is reductive to say that these features alone can identify these characters as non-white, my understanding of Korra and Asami as women of color draws on worldbuilding established in the initial *Avatar* series.

Despite the use of American English for all of the characters across both series, there is little to no Western influence on the worldbuilding within the two shows, and all of the characters can be understood as Asian (in some capacity) in relation to the strong Eastern references and imagery used throughout the show.

The lack of a Western or white presence in the show makes the identification of race and ethnicity difficult, as race is typically understood as being a marker of difference that establishes itself as a counterpart to whiteness. The strong connections to non-White cultures established by the series, coupled with the appearance of the characters, alleviates this concern (Dyer 2008, 9-10). Writing about *Kung-Fu Panda* (2008) and the communication of transnational bodies in animation in her article "Animated Animal Bodies as Layered Sites of (Trans)National Identities," Hye Jean Chung affirms that "this [animated] body is indexically linked to numerous human bodies involved in the film's creative process through visual, cultural, and intertextual references" (Chung 2012, 34). Chung argues that, in *Kung-Fu Panda*, the characters have undeniable national identities that are communicated through indexicality. In the movie, China is connoted through visual, cultural, and architectural cues that Western audiences understand as a shorthand for the East generally and China specifically. Chung emphasizes Kung-Fu as the main indexical cue, as each of the main characters in *Kung-Fu Panda* symbolize different styles of Chinese martial arts, including Praying Mantis, Tiger Style, and White Crane. More obviously, Poe, the hero of the movie, is a giant panda, which Chung argues is an unequivocal symbol of China across the globe (35).

Through the inclusion of these cultural signifiers, *Kung-Fu Panda* is able to connote a Western understanding of China that transcends the racelessness of the cartoon animals and their mostly white voice actors (32). For *The Legend of Korra*, the overt associations with Eastern cultures established in the original *Avatar* series allow even the fairest of

characters to be understood as people of color by way of indexical values. Although there are technological advancements within the story that have taken place in the several decades since the original series concluded, very few of the worldbuilding elements from the *Avatar* series have been removed. The indexical links to Asia and indigenous tribes of the poles established in the first series carry over into *The Legend of Korra*. These indexical links, like in Chung's analysis of *Kung-Fu Panda*, override the mediating effect that animation has on the constructions of race and nationality (Chung 2012).

The sexualities of Korra and Asami are not based in the same indexical values that can be used to determined ethnic connections, as their romantic involvement is more a matter of queer subtext and paratext than that of cultural connotations established through images and symbols. The presence of queer subtext in children's media, specifically cartoons, has been studied extensively; for example, Alexander Doty, in his books *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (1993) and *Flaming Classics* (2000), uses children's cartoons to speak to the long history of queer subtext across mediums and genres (Doty). Richard Reitsma examines *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000) and *Chicken Little* (2005) to do similar thinking, though Reitsma studies how the narratives utilize queerness as a sign of defect, like a moral flaw, in these animated kid's movies (2013). Jeffrey Dennis' article "The Same Thing We Do Every Night: Signifying Same-Sex Desire in Television Toons" looks at *Daria* (1997-2002), *The Simpsons* (1989-present), and *Rocko's Modern Life* (1993-1996) for coded examples of queer desire. Many of these examples are paired with denouncements of queerness that are in-line with Reitsma's findings (Dennis 2010).

Sean Griffin provides one survey of the ways that animated films and cartoons have used queer subtext to affirm the normative position of heterosexuality (Griffin 2017). While his chapter "The 'Queerness' of Animation" engages more heavily with the historical contexts of *Snow White* (1933), *Rabbit Fire* (1951), and *The Lion King* (1994),

Griffin's analysis is grounded in the fact that the queerness coded into these cartoons designed for children is only ever that (177). He characterizes these queer subtexts as a "chaotic playhouse of signification", where drag, gay-coded male characters, and discrepancies in gender performances are constantly used to reaffirm the normality of heterosexuality, emphasize the implicit unnaturalness of queerness, and center masculinity in these discussions of sexuality (Griffin, 176-178; 192)

Throughout the course of *The Legend of Korra*, Korra and Asami grew close as friends and allies, but the subtext established in the series finale functions very differently from what Griffin identifies in his study of animated media. For Griffin, who looked primarily at Disney films and Bugs Bunny cartoons, there was never an indication that any of the queer subtext would manifest as a canonical identity. Although there was nothing but subtext that supported Korra and Asami's queerness in the course of the show's run, their relationship was canonized almost immediately after the series ended. The finale of the series, "The Last Stand," aired on December 19, 2014; the final scene of the episode shows Korra and Asami gazing at each other to a swell of dramatic music. Three days later, Bryan Konietzko published a post to his personal Tumblr blog that confirmed that the two characters were, in fact, in a canon romantic relationship that had been developing behind-the-scenes and that was culminating in this finale moment (Konietzko 2014). Konietzko explained that Korra and Asami's framing in the last scene was a purposeful reflection of the stances of a bride and groom in a wedding ceremony, which was as close as his creative team could come to an outright declaration of the characters' romantic involvement (2014).

This blog post is an example of Jonathan Gray's authorial interventions, one of many kinds of paratexts that he identifies in *Show Sold Separately* (2010). While I do not intend to debate the merits of authorial intervention as compared to audience interpretation, Gray's assertion that "producer-end paratexts hold significant power in inflecting

audiences' interpretive frameworks" turns Konietzko's paratextual blog post into a post-scrip for the show. Konietzko's lengthy description of how Korra and Asami's relationship was developed – and necessarily hidden – recontextualizes the entirety of *The Legend of Korra* series without actually changing anything about how the characters are communicated on-screen (Gray 2010, 110). By emphasizing that, yes, Korra and Asami are a couple, Konietzko provides canonical weight to the relationship immediately after the show's conclusion on Nickelodeon. All of the subtextual interactions between Korra and Asami align in the wake of his comments, and this effectively rewrites the show.

Despite Konietzko's authorial blessing on the relationship, queerness in *The Legend of Korra* franchise was effectively in escrow until the publishing of *Turf Wars* in 2017. Korra and Asami share a kiss five pages into the first issue of the series, and the comics waste no time in developing the existence of queer people outside of Korra and Asami, including other pre-existing characters like Kya, Aang's adult daughter. What is striking about *Turf Wars* outside of the immediate canonization of Korra and Asami's relationship is the fact that the comic alludes to a deep history of queerness previously unacknowledged in any part of the *Avatar* universe. In a conversation with Kya, Korra and Asami are given a history of the four nations' attitudes towards queerness, with treatment ranging from complete acceptance to criminalization of same-sex couples (DiMartino 2017). Kya indicates that past Avatars themselves have been queer – most notably Avatar Kyoshi, who appeared several times during *The Last Airbender*. Kya indicates that attitudes towards queer people across the four nations have not progressed equally, and that repression and hostility are still reactions that Korra and Asami should anticipate (DiMartino 2017). This sudden influx of queer characters in the *Avatar* universe demonstrates the near-surgical precision with which this representation was excluded from the television component of the franchise. The only whisper of queerness that exists in the

show comes from subtext that requires the support of authorial paratext, as demonstrated in Konietzko's blog post - but even this is far removed in time from the publishing of *Turf Wars.*

Though Jenkins maintains that transmedia storytelling allows for the exploration of narrative, characters, and story that may not be totally possible in one medium, the foundation of Korra and Asami's relationship in the comics is supported more by authorial paratexts than any actual moments of queerness in *The Legend of Korra* (Jenkins 2006). Despite the authorial verification of their relationship by Konietzko and DiMartino, the fact that Korra and Asami's romance was drawn more from paratexts than any actual queerness in the show makes them plastic television characters. What makes comics transmedia is that they connect "to the creative core" of their television shows, and specifically draw on something from *within* the show (Clarke 2013, 61). Clarke's examination of the creation of comic book expansions for *Heroes* (NBC, 2006-2010) and *24* (Fox, 2001-2014) demonstrates that each of the transmedia stories draw heavily from plotlines, characters, or Easter eggs present already in the shows. Korra and Asami, in stark contrast, are coupled in a very small moment from the end of the show. Even though Konietzko indicates the limitations on what he and his co-creator could show in the finale, Korra and Asami's relationship is still on the periphery of the mothership. This placement reinforces that these identities – and, subsequently, the audiences reflected by them – are themselves peripheral to the core of the text, even when the show focuses extensively on heterosexual relationships and acceptance. This constant placement of queer women of color, both as characters and as consumers of media, on the fringes of a franchise by transmedia storytelling makes it difficult to avoid drawing conclusions about industrial anxieties and the value of queer women of color as audiences.

This sidelining of queer women of color in *The Legend of Korra* becomes especially apparent when it is compared to the extensive use of heterosexual romantic tension throughout the show. In *Animating Difference* (2010), King et al. analyze several animated children's films from the angle of queer subtext. King et al. reinforce Griffin's assertion that queer subtext works to reinforce the abnormality of queerness, but they also emphasize that unspoken heterosexuality is one of the ideological constructions of children's animated films (King et al. 2010, 50-51). This additionally holds true for *The Legend of* Korra; the first season of the show splits its narrative attention between the main antagonist and the various love triangles operating amongst the characters. Korra eventually begins to date Mako, a male fire bender, who was previously in a relationship with Asami – but Mako is the fulcrum of this romantic tension, rather than Asami, and the two women begin their relationship as romantic competitors. Another love triangle persists between other character where, again, a man is the central point of strife and attraction between two women. Although these romantic plotlines resolve, there is an overt focus on heterosexual coupling in the show established from the get-go and that reinforces King et al.'s claim that constructions of heterosexuality are an implicit aspect of children's media. The show begins with Mako and Korra's burgeoning relationship, and it ends, rather conspicuously, on a heterosexual wedding that serves as a cheeky backdrop to Korra and Asami's longing looks in *The Legend of Korra's* last scene.

By this logic, and due to the fact that the franchise had not engaged with queerness prior to *Turf Wars*, queer sexuality cannot be present unless it is explicitly named as such. Once these alternate sexualities are transmedially quarantined away from television, however, the comics neatly pick up where the show left off, similar to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in this swift continuation of the comics and its inclusion of a budding romance between Buffy and another female character (Clarke 2013, Mittell 2015). However, distinct

from the *Buffy* comics, *Turf Wars'* first trade paperback spends significant narrative energy exploring these newfound queer politics. Korra and Asami's navigation of their new relationship is more than half of the plot of *Turf Wars*, and it takes great pains to convert the queer *subtext* of the show into queer *content* in the comics. The narrative consequences of the show's final season play an extremely secondary role to this queer exposition.

It would be easy to assume that the challenges to queer representation in *The Legend of Korra's* transmedia texts were alleviated by the United States' legalization of same-sex marriage in 2016. However, while the show is able to be confident and direct about its characterization of these characters as non-white, their queerness is untenable on television, and I argue this difference derives from the reticence of children's television to offer queer representation that does not reinforce normative heterosexuality. Additionally, the reputation of transmedia storytelling as an expansion on an existing property gives the impression that the (three years later) development of Korra and Asami's relationship is a *good* thing, because transmedia storytelling implies that audiences are able to get more of what they want – even if there is only a whisper of initial queerness in the mothership of the franchise.

Adventure Time and *Marceline and the Scream Queens*

The issue of representation in *Adventure Time* is troubled by the convoluted nature of the story and the sheer number of episodes to examine. Created by Pendleton Ward and airing on Cartoon Network, *Adventure Time* (2010-2018) takes place in a post-apocalyptic world called Ooo. The occupants of this world, altered by the radiation from the war that ushered in the end of civilization, range from animate clouds to anthropomorphic breakfast foods to elementals. Finn, the show's main character, is the only human left in the entire world, but many of the other characters are humanoid, including Marceline (who has

human lineage) and Princess Bonnibel Bubblegum. Identifying how Marceline and Bubblegum are coded as women/of color requires a critical examination of their character designs and the gender discourses implicit in the series. Their queerness, unlike Korra and Asami's, is determined by the stitching together of different character moments between comics and episodes in a form of transmedia "streamability". Clarke defines this streamability as "the ability to move creative products from one platform to another" (2013, 28). While Clarke applies this more broadly to the movement of franchises and brands across platforms, streamability can help to overcome the linear and medium shifts by thinking of all of these developments as interconnected. Marceline and Bubblegum's trajectories interface with one another through an intricate balance between mediums that is not fully linear. By tracing a complicated path between episodes, comics, and more episodes, we can see how *Marceline and the Scream Queens* serves as a Rosetta Stone for the conversations, arguments, and episodes that focus on these two characters' relationship.

My use of "queer women/of color" for these characters addresses the fact that Bubblegum's racial identity is unknowable. Unlike Marceline, who has connections to a human (and raced) past, Bubblegum's body is quite literally made of chewing gum, and she has vibrant pink skin and hair as a result. Although *Adventure Time* takes place in a future far removed from my own, the position of whiteness as the most common, and unspoken, cultural denominator as emphasized by Richard Dyer's essay "The Matter of Whiteness" allows me to apply the paradigm of explicitly discernable racial difference to Marceline (Dyer 2005, 10). For Marceline, her parentage demonstrates explicit racial difference; Bubblegum, conversely, comes from material that was previously inanimate and is consistently non-human. The idea that racial identities emerge as a means of differentiating themselves from the default of whiteness applies well to Marceline. Dyer's conversation of racial "neutrality," however, does not map well onto Bubblegum's

unorthodox origins, and I find it reductive to try and construct a racial identity based on pink skin and hair. Because Marceline and Bubblegum function as a joint representative unit for queer women of color, where one character can be understood as a woman and the other as a woman of color, I annotate this as queer women/of color.

Figure 1 shows the timeline for key episodes, comics, and events in *Adventure Time*. *"Scream Queens"* (2012) refers to the publishing of the *Marceline and the Scream Queens* comics. "Pendleton Ward Paratext" refers to the 2014 interview with Ward where he confirmed a past relationship between Marceline and Bubblegum, both of which will be discussed below. All other points on the timeline are *Adventure Time* episodes, with "Come Along With Me" being the series finale (Figure 1).

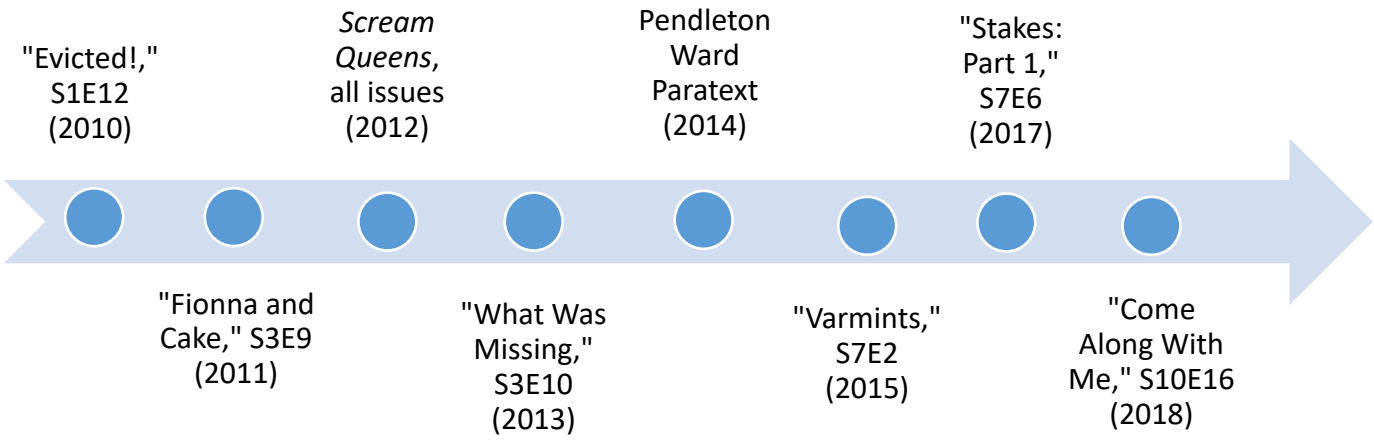

Figure 1: Timeline of *Adventure Time* episodes, comics, and paratexts, 2010-2018.

Bubblegum is the sole ruler of the Candy Kingdom, an opulent city where all of the subjects are sentient sweets and pastries (though none of them possess bodies that are as human-seeming as Bubblegum's). Marceline is a study in metaphors; she is half-human, half-demon, a vampire, *and* multiracial. Marceline has existed since the nuclear war, which

makes her older than Bubblegum, but it takes her character considerably longer to be incorporated into the main ensemble. The slow unveiling of these different facets of Marceline's background and identity parallel the incorporation of her into the main ensemble of characters. When Marceline is introduced in the 12th episode of the first season, "Evicted!" (Fig 1, 2010), she immediately declares herself as a vampire, and the demonic aspect of her heritage is introduced in *Adventure Time's* season two premiere. Despite the ostensible racelessness of vampire Marceline and her demon father, she is always shown as having pale, grey-white skin. The combination of her fair skin and dark hair alongside Finn's fair skin and blonde hair makes the reading of her as white understandable until the brief introduction of her mother in the show's seventh season.

Featured in the second episode of the "Stakes", a special run of episodes devoted to Marceline and her backstory, Marceline's mother is depicted as having brown skin and dark hair in a brief flashback (Fig 1, 2015). This is *Adventure Time's* 201st episode, a point at which Marceline has had a dozen featured episodes; for approximately two thirds of her existence, Marceline is easily assumed to be white. Her human mother's dark complexion and hair make it so that Marceline is undeniably a person of color, but this addition to her heritage does not translate in any meaningful way into her appearance and isn't incorporated into Marceline's history until three years after the introduction of Marceline's father. This is reminiscent of *The Legend of Korra's* retroactive insertion of queer politics into their story world; if Marceline has been a human (of color) all along, how has this factor of her identity not had a stronger (or even detectable) bearing on her other narratives? Other character storylines in *Adventure Time* engage with issues of identity tailored to their narratives, ranging from parentage, societal expectations, and even existential insignificance. For Bubblegum, her identity as the Candy Kingdom's only monarch and the loneliness therein guides her actions and character development consistently

throughout the entire show, and even catalyzes the conflict of its last season. Finn development of his identity as a hero and his moral compass are nuanced throughout the show. The first half of the series consistently emphasizes that Finn is the last human on earth, and he grapples with a criminal father that abandoned him as a child. Marceline's episodes focus on her difficulty reconciling her histories and identities, chiefly with her demonic father and her transformation into a vampire. The human facet of her identity, however, isn't given much attention until "Stakes." While this slow reveal of Marceline's human side may fit into the narrative construction of *Adventure Time* in terms of season arcs, the fact that Marceline's unseen human side is non-white is conspicuous, especially when we consider that Finn and his father are both depicted as white.

Bubblegum's own character identity is even more elusive than Marceline's, as she is best understood as sentient chewing gum that has fashioned the identity of a woman. Judith Butler conceptualizes gender as a "stylized repetition of acts," and this theorization of gender as performance allows Bubblegum to present a gender identity that overrides the genderless implications of living gum (Butler 1988, 520). Bubblegum, a non-human but humanoid character, uses she/her/hers pronouns, wears dresses, and is referred to as "princess" by almost every character that interacts with her. Despite the fact that she is made of radioactive gum, she performs and signifies as a woman. Outside of reading Bubblegum's behavior and characterization, *Adventure Time* implicitly structures a gender binary through a series of "gender-bending" episodes. The first of these episodes, "Fionna and Cake" (2011), gives each and every character from the show a gender "opposite." Although it is reductive to speak of gender in such binaried terms, many of these characters stylize themselves through pronouns, names, and appearance in relation to traditionally understood gender alignments. "Fionna and Cake" essentially flips these alignments,

offering versions of the characters that signify opposing gender stylizations than what is seen in standard *Adventure Time* episodes.

The subtextual allusions to a past relationship between Marceline and Bubblegum was established as canonical by authorial paratexts in 2014. Olivia Olson, the voice actor for Marceline, divulged that she had a conversation with creator Pendleton Ward over the two characters' attraction to one another, and Ward confirmed that Marceline and Bubblegum have a romantic past (Bollis 2014). This paratextual support was enough to land *Adventure Time* a small nod in the 2014 GLAAD "Where We Are On TV" report. The reference reads more like a dig children's media and its lack of representation than a celebration of the characters, and it is the only mention of a cartoon in the report from 2010 through 2017 (GLAAD 2010-2017).

This authorial paratext functions very differently in *Adventure Time* than it does in *The Legend of Korra* because of the steady transmedia exchanges that happen between the different components of Marceline and Bubblegum's story. The show develops a relationship between the two characters that exists in both past and present, with references to bygone tensions, fights, and emotional struggles peppered throughout *Adventure Time's* long life that are foregrounded in *Marceline and the Scream Queens*. The first issue of the series, released in 2012, provides some of the earliest inklings of a relationship between the two characters. While the foundation laid by this series of comics seems thin when read on its own, there are scenes and plot points in the comics that become richer when read in context with certain episodes of the show; these moments, then, stream between the mediums, and while they can still function perfectly well when separate, certain moments in the comics directly correlate to television episodes.

The tenth episode of the third season, "What Was Missing" (2013), involves a trickster creature stealing precious items from Marceline, Bubblegum, and two other main

characters. Marceline hints at a complicated past relationship with Bubblegum through a song, referencing a "pretty pink face" that is easily understood to represent Bubblegum. Marceline sings about feelings of inadequacy, anger, and an ultimate desire to reconcile with Bubblegum from a vague, but intense, past conflict. In the second issue of *Marceline and the Scream Queens,* released in November 2012, there is a literal illustration of Marceline's song. While Marceline is performing with her band, a robot named Kevin that Bubblegum created to paint the landscape red is overtaken by Marceline's lyrics. It paints an enormous, technicolor mural of Bubblegum that is in stark contrast to the edgy, punk rock image that Marceline associates with herself. The mural depicts Bubblegum as a vibrantly pink, harp-playing angel, with a rainbow running underneath her as she plays. When the real Bubblegum asks Kevin why it painted the mural, the robot responds "But the music! It made Kevin feel feelings that weren't red! Kevin wanted to paint the colors the music made him *feel"* (emphasis original) (Hicks 2012). In the end of "What Was Missing," the precious item that was stolen from Bubblegum turns out to be a shirt gifted to her by Marceline. Upon close inspection, the shirt can be seen on Bubblegum in the third issue of the comics. She is shown wearing it upon waking up, and even though the details are blurry, it is absolutely the same article of clothing that was stolen in the episode.

"Varmints" (2017), the second episode of the seventh season, features a story about Marceline and Bubblegum where they spend an adventure together, and it provides similarly vague references to a nebulous past between the two. During the course of the episode, Marceline reminds Bubblegum of how she used to be when they were younger, ostensibly hundreds of years ago, and Bubblegum comes to terms with the fact that her intense work ethic has pushed away Marceline over the last few years. This allusion to a lost closeness between the two of them sheds light on a fight between Marceline and Bubblegum in the sixth issue of the comics. A friend of Marceline's calls the argument

between the two characters a "little fight," and Marceline immediately replies that the situation between her and Bubblegum is complicated. While "Varmints" is not the first instance of the complex dynamic between the two, Marceline admitting herself that her fights with Bubblegum are complex happens solely in this issue of the comics. The fight in "What Was Missing" and the slow revelation of details of what Marceline and Bubblegum were like in the amorphous "before" matches the tone of complexity that Marceline establishes in her comic. Throughout "Varmints," the two often blush at their memories and proximity, and the episode's final shot is of Bubblegum leaning her head against Marceline's shoulder while she sleeps.

There are only a handful of episodes that focus on Marceline and Bubblegum with the same intensity as the ones mentioned above, and they seem even less significant when compared to the massive roster of *Adventure Time* episodes – out of a total of 283 episodes, there are less than 10 episodes dedicated to the two. This transmedially crafted relationship, however dispersed, eventually enjoyed an eleventh-hour canonization moment in the series' finale. Where *The Legend of Korra* picks up on transmedia expansion after a significant period of escrow, *Adventure Time* plants a seed in one medium that is watered, sometimes retroactively, in another. The *Adventure Time* finale, "Come Along With Me" (2018), shows a very brief kiss between the two that completes the circuit that begins in *Marceline and the Scream Queens*. This exchange between mediums that focuses on these secondary characters is a classic deployment of transmedia storytelling. The complexity of how these characters are constructed in television as queer women/of color paired with the non-liner streamability of these relationship-building moments in the comics challenges them as representative of queer women of color; in order to get this full picture of their relationship and identities, extensive dedication to *Adventure Time* in terms of time *and* multiple media forms is necessary.

Plastic Imaginations

By examining how these characters' identities and relationships are constructed in their respective transmedia systems, I have shown that representations for queer women of color in cartoons can be a matter of connecting the dots. For *The Legend of Korra*, the concretization of Korra and Asami as queer women of color required that audiences endure an extreme delay for further development. The comic supplement, though providing the kind of hyperdiegetic exposition that is the hallmark of this creative strategy, was completely disconnected from the real-world timeline of the show while narratively taking place immediately after the ending of the show. The surgical removal of queerness away from *The Legend of Korra's* universe becomes even more conspicuous when considering this passage of time. Unlike with *Adventure Time*, there are no kernels to which the suddenly robust queer politics of *Turf Wars* can connect. The comics try to assert that queer characters and queer discourses have existed since *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, but the overwhelming focus on heterosexual romance in the show reinforces my conversation in Chapter 2 concerning Nickelodeon's resistance to outright queer characters.

As a result of this intense transmedia quarantining, Korra and Asami's television selves are plastic while their *transmedia* selves are fully-developed queer women of color. The plasticity of their identities in television is reinforced by the fact that there are no attachments to queer politics in other aspects of the franchise, despite its reputation for meticulous attention to detail. This difference in plasticity between television-selves and transmedia-selves for Korra and Asami further crystallizes the fact that both mediums – comics and cartoons – are necessary for a full understanding of their characters. In the same way that Jenkins argues that a transmedia system allows audiences to engage with a franchise from as many (or as few) avenues as they want, the existence of Korra and Asami's identities at the transmedia level makes it so that these multiple avenues of

engagement also allows them to avoid queerness with surprising ease (Jenkins 2006 96). Therefore, the plasticity of Korra and Asami compounds the imagination gap by demonstrating that plasticity persists if their characters are not examined from multiple axes in a transmedia system.

These characters, despite canonically being queer women of color, are only legitimized when they are examined from a transmedia lens; television and comic books must be put in conversation in order for the characters to be legible as such. There are imagination gaps between all of the pieces that audiences jigsaw together from decoded comic panels, paratexts, and episodes, and although they are not as decontextualized as Korra and Asami, Marceline and Bubblegum emphasize the mandatory assembly required to parse these characters and their relationship. The development of Marceline and Bubblegum's relationship was slow and cautious, and collecting these developments requires attention, time, and money. When different media are used to expand on these characters, the television show at the heart of the franchise can be shielded from the political baggage associated with loaded identities. On television alone, Korra and Asami are not queer. Bubblegum and Marceline are only queer for a second, and this queerness is their final moment in the medium. This is the problem at the heart of transmedia quarantining: Jenkins' "entry points" into the franchise can also function as *avoidance* points (2006, 96). Transmedia storytelling creates a situation where undesirable story elements can be quarantined away from the core aspect of a franchise while still technically remaining attached. *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time* do contain representations of queer women of color, but only when you take the franchise as a whole; only retroactively; only after waiting years for more material; only after painstakingly stitching together a complete picture.

CONCLUSION: *DOES IT GET BETTER?*

This project contextualized the industrial, cultural, and narrative conditions that lead to transmedia quarantining in children's cartoons. Starting with the post-network era's disruption of longstanding industrial practices in television, I worked my way through exploring the various strategies that Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network use to navigate the changing technological and social landscapes of television. In my adapted form of multicasting, I describe how the two channels were able to incorporate adults into their viewerships without alienating their primary market of children. These shows multicast to adults through specific means of engagement, most notably complicated story worlds that yield an immense wealth of potential for transmedia extensions. The use of comic books for *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time's* most narratively satisfying transmedia component multiplies the demographic hierarchies already at work on television. Queer women of color, who are a both an unacknowledged subset of the adult viewing audience *and* underrepresented characters, are forced into transmedia comics for representation. Caught between two mediums that do not prioritize them as readers or as characters, queer women of color are transmedially quarantined into these supplemental, all-ages comics.

Just as these cartoons were at once broad and niche in their appeal, I am both optimistic and nervous about what future cartoons might look like in the evolving post-network landscape. The title of this conclusion draws from the It Gets Better Project, a nonprofit that got its start in 2010 through community activism and affirming video testimonials from queer people from around the globe (itgetsbetter.org). Many of the more popular video are from actors, like Zachary Quinto, Neil Patrick Harris, and Laverne Cox. One of the campaign's most recent video uploads was from Noelle Stevenson, creator and executive producer of DreamWorks' *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018-present).

This reboot of the 1985 *She-Ra* cartoon features several canonically queer characters, and Stevenson talks about how making the show allowed her to work through her own relationship with her gender and sexual identities. Notably, however, *She-Ra* is on Netflix, and not cable television. In the wake of this project, then, my conflicting mix of emotions makes me wonder: did it actually get better for television? If yes, will it continue to get better? While Chapter 3's focus was on the intricate – and sometimes illegible – constructions of these characters' identities throughout, I also started to address some of the other ramifications of pushing queer women of color to the fringes of these transmedia systems. Though transmedia quarantining seems to be an extremely contextual problem, the fringing of queer stories - and queer people – reinforces the idea that there is something inherently inappropriate about queer people (Hendershot 2007, 181).

If scholars do not interrogate the quarantining potential of transmedia storytelling, the relegation of marginalized stories to niche media may become an even more prominent trend. As I mention in Chapter 2, this is not necessarily a negative; small, independent publishers are able to provide tailored content that is as uncompromisingly frank as it wants to be (Whaley 2016, 25). In transmedia systems, however, pushing these stories onto the edges of the systems is not just a distancing of the content away from more mainstream media; it is, implicitly, a statement on the value of who is reflected in and attracted to those stories. The low value placed on queer women of color as audiences by transmedia storytelling is just an extension of their devaluation by television at-large. The constant pushing of these identities to the fringes of media reinforces the status of queer women of color as Other in the cultural imaginary; when our stories are kept out of sight, or at arm's length, Thomas' imagination gap grows. GLAAD reports, queerbaiting, transmedia quarantining, and multicasting are all indications that the medium that has yet to catch up with the world it supposedly reflects.

Despite the persistent lack of visibility, and despite the transmedia quarantining I have studied in these two cases, cartoons have made significant leaps in their representations of queer people/of color. *Steven Universe's* 2018 episode "Made of Honor" seemingly broke open the dam for unambiguous queer representations in cartoons. Two recurring male police officers from Disney's *Gravity Falls* (2012-2016) expressed their affection for one another nearly every time they were on-screen; in the final episodes of the show, they are shown embracing, holding hands, and declaring their love for one another. One of the main characters from Nickelodeon's *The Loud House* (2016-present) is a young black boy with two fathers, who are themselves an interracial couple. DreamWorks' *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018-present) made a similar move, giving a black teen named Bow two black fathers.

Though these contemporary cartoons bolster the numbers for visible queer people in children's media, there is still a disparity in even that representation for queer women of color. My analysis of racial encoding in *The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time* in Chapter 3 of this project shows how race is understood for just these two shows. Each show requires a different set of interpretive logics, and the difficulty of interpreting these marginalized identities increases alongside the narrative complexity of a given show. All of this is to say that an increase in diverse cartoons does not correlate with a simplification of diversity in cartoons; knowing if queer representation in cartoons "gets better" can only come after determining if the representation is accessible. Even as the three aforementioned shows offer representation for queer people/of color, there is always the potential for transmedia quarantining of other aspects of identity that I have not been able to engage here, such as disability, nationality, and gender transitioning. Undoubtedly, this paradigm of transmedia quarantining will persist, and adapt; television technology, particularly streaming and online video, are evolving at a pace that Lotz could not have accounted for

when she wrote the first edition of *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. As television continues to shift and change, industries will find a way to prioritize the content that will earn them the most valuable audiences. But transmedia quarantining makes it so that these outlying stories, such as the ones studied in my second chapter, will remain *just* tethered enough to the core of the franchise to boost the numbers in GLAAD reports.

These shows – all the ones mentioned here, not just my case studies – demonstrate that cartoons can, and do, effectively communicate the nuances of identity intersections, including but not limited to race, gender, and sexuality. While the level of complexity in *Adventure Time* and *The Legend of Korra* may, in fact, be unique, the influx of more queer characters in cartoons shows that the representation potentials are not. Thomas' theorization of the imagination gap was meant specifically to gauge the homogeneity of media designed for children. The calculated adult appeal of these cartoons, as I have argued throughout, does not change the fact that these shows are created primarily for children. This project was unable to dive fully into the cultural stigma that might be levied at queer women of color who turn to kid's media for representation. Chapter 2 briefly engages the endemic hostility of comic books towards cultural outsiders, but this conversation couldn't fully dive into the potential ramifications for queer women of color who often turn to kid's media. How much do women of color have to justify their affective attachments to these media?

Banet-Weiser argues that the "boundaries between adult[s] and child[ren] are indistinct" because of how they are produced; these age categories are defined more by culture than by biology, and the shows are made for an *idea* of what kids want, rather than what is communicated by actual kids (Banet-Weiser 2007, 181). Banet-Weiser documents this slippage in age from the level of cultural production, but does this imaginary boundary apply to the level of cultural consumption? Can queer women of color seek out and enjoy

diverse kid's content without being accused of violating this manufactured distinction between "adult" and "kid" content? The answer to this question requires attention to the way that women are infantilized by media and the persistent association of queerness with perversity.

If cartoons continue to provide diverse representations of queer people/of color, more work will need to be done on attitudes towards adults who consume this media. Both *Adventure Time* and *The Legend of Korra* have been nominated for a variety of awards, including Television Critics Association, Kid's Choice, Teen Choice, Annie Awards, and Peabody – which *Adventure Time* won in 2015 (Rife 2015). Yet, there is a significant difference between watching cartoons that have earned industrial and critical respect and watching "average" cartoons, like *Ben 10* (2016-present) or *Rabbids Invasion* (2013-present). What happens to queer women of color if they watch diverse cartoons that haven't – or never – earn the same level of respect? As I have noted, adult audiences of cartoons are often treated as a monolith, and audience studies that focus specifically on these adult audiences would assist in decoding who these "adults" are. By catering research to a cultural conception of adult audiences (rather than an industrial one), future research could illuminate how adult watches of cartoons perceive of themselves *and* how they are perceived by others. Further, ethnographic research on adults who watch cartoons could inform *why* adults turn to cartoons that are intended for children, particularly where issues of identity and representation are concerned.

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